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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

A RESOURCEFUL FOE

STREET & SMITH, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.

WHILE NICK HELD ZEL'S ATTENTION CHICK STOLE QUIETLY INTO THE ROOM

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

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A RESOURCEFUL FOE;*

Or, NICK CARTER DEFIED.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THIRTY DAYS DEAD.

"I wish to see Inspector Byrnes at once."

It was Nick Carter who spoke, and he was standing before the desk where genial Tom Adams presides, at police headquarters, in the city of New York.

"Hello, Nick!" exclaimed Tom; "is that you? What's up now?"

"Is he engaged?" asked Nick, disregarding the last question.

"No, go right in."

"Thanks."

One moment later, Nick Carter and the great inspector were alone together in the private office.

"Well, Nick, what can I do for you?"

"You can listen to the most remarkable sequence of events that ever came to the knowledge of a human being; that is, if the last one is true."

"That is putting it rather strong, Nick."

"None too strong, however."

"You interest me."

"I will astonish you."

"Good; I like to be astonished. The sensation will have novelty. I don't think I have really been astonished in ten years. But let me hear your yarn."

"You remember Doctor Quartz?"

"Certainly."

"And Zel, the woman who passed as Clarita Downing, and who afterward poisoned herself in the boarding house opposite where I live?"

"Yes. She was a female fiend, wasn't she?"

"I should say so."

"What about her?"

"Do you recall the circumstances of her death?"

"Perfectly."

"Do you remember that you and Inspector Williams both laughed at me for causing a watch to be placed over her corpse, until she was buried?"

"Yes, and over her grave also, after she was buried. That was the most laughable part of it."

"Events have proven that I was justified in my caution, in fact, that I did not exercise caution enough."

"Eh? How long did you watch the grave?"

"A week."

"Well, in all conscience, when a person has been buried a week, under six feet of earth, I think a reasonable doubt might be entertained as to the possibility of that person being alive."

"Yes, if the person who was buried was an ordinary one."

"Oh, come, Nick! All people are ordinary."

"Perhaps so. Did you ever hear of a famous trick sometimes played by the Hindu fakirs, called 'the resurrection'?"

"Often."

"Do you know what they do?"

"Partly."

"A fakir causes himself to be buried, after first lying down and dying. The best physicians have not been able to detect a sign of life about the fakir."

"Humph!"

"The spectator sees him die; he watches while the supposed corpse is buried; he places a guard over the grave, and it is watched unceasingly for the number of days the fakir has designated. At the expiration of this period the grave is opened and the body is exhumed. Presently it begins to show signs of life; later it sits up

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and talks, and finally the fakir gets up and walks away, as much alive as before he was buried."

"Well, I have my own opinion of that trick, Nick."

"What is it?"

"I think the spectator is "green goods'd.'"

"Do you think that I could be 'green goods'd'?"

"No."

"I have seen that trick performed in India; I have been the spectator; I have watched the grave, and I believe it can be and is done by those fakirs."

"Well, what are you getting at?"

"Doctor Quartz spent many years in India."

"I have heard so."

"He once played the 'dead' racket on the officials in Frisco."

"Yes, that is true."

"He was more expert in the knowledge of poisons than any man I ever heard of."

"Granted."

"Zel was his pupil."

"And a very apt one."

"I think she became even more expert than her instructor."

"Possibly—and now, what of it?"

"Zelma is not dead."

"Pshaw!"

"I came to you because I thought you would like to know of it; because, if she is alive, you should know of it."

"Yes—true."

"She has been a murderer a dozen times."

"Yes."

"There is a way of proving my statement to be true or false?"

"How?"

"By opening the grave."

"Hum! How long has she been buried?"

"At three o'clock this afternoon it will be just forty-nine days."

"Well, I have no fancy for being present when a body that has been buried forty-nine days is uncovered."

"Nor I, but I believe that the grave will be found to be empty."

"You have lately discovered a reason for that idea?"

"Yes—certainly."

"Nick, if anybody but you should approach me on this subject, I should not entertain it for a moment. I will listen to you, however, so fire away."

"I have a servant named Patsy."

"Yes."

"A boy, and a very shrewd one."

"Yes."

"Patsy was with me in the 'Package 17—A' case."

"Yes."

"He is the cause of my call upon you to-day."

"Well?"

"A week ago he was in a cemetery at the grave of a relative who lately died."

"Yes."

"It happened to be near that of Zelma."

"Humph!"

"He strolled that way in returning, and paused to look at it. Zel interests him because she came near doing for him once."

"Go on."

"He has sharp eyes, and, as he looked, he thought that the grave had some appearance of having been disturbed. Then he began a more careful examination. He was not sure about the disturbance, but presently he picked up a bit of paper that was near him, and was surprised to find that it contained the name 'Zelma.' Then he searched for other bits of paper. Scattered about, in all directions, he found many. He spent the balance of the day there, picking up scraps of paper, and at night he came home.

"He said nothing to me about what he had found, but went to work at once, putting the bits together in proper shape."

"Well, did he succeed?"

"He did."

"What is the result?"

"Last night he handed me the most remarkable document that I ever saw."

"Remarkable in what way?"

"Here it is, pasted together in readable form. Read it."

"Thanks."

"You will see that part of the letter—the first part—is missing, and in three places Patsy has supplied a word to make the sense good, in this part. Probably the missing portion of the letter has been torn off to wrap around something, and the remainder was torn into bits as Patsy found it. But read it."

Here is what the inspector read:

"— — — — count thirty days from that upon which I am supposed to have died; then subtract the number of hours necessary to place the time for your work in the night.

"In other words, if you would rescue me, you must act the night before, and not the night after, the thirty days expire.

"Force my mouth open and give me five drops of liquid from this vial; no more, no less.

"Then wait, doing nothing, for thirty minutes. At the end of that time, if you have followed my instructions, I will speak to you.

"You have said that you love me and that you cared not what my sins might have been, if I would be your wife.

"Save me, and I will be yours!

"Remember, I shall have been thirty days in a grave; thirty days—less the few hours referred to—buried in the ground; thirty days dead!

"When I am resurrected, I will belong to you.

"ZELMA."

The inspector was now thoroughly interested.

"Do you believe that she has been exhumed, Nick?"

"Yes; I do."

"It looks like it."

"It does."

"Patsy missed one thing when he found these scraps of paper. I wish he had found the name of the man to whom this letter was addressed."

"Yes; but he didn't."

"No."

"Now, inspector, I have a plan."

"What?"

"Let us have the grave opened."

"With all my heart."

"Let us do it this afternoon."

"All right."

"At three. We will meet there, or here?"

"Here. Be here at two, Nick. I will ask Williams to

go with us, and we will stop on the way over for Superintendent Campbell. That will just fill the carriage."

"Good; I will bring mine, and let Chick do the driving. Will you obtain the necessary permission?"

"Yes. I will have the details all fixed."

"Thanks, we will find the grave empty, mark my words."

"We will see—we will see, Nick."

"Did I ever tell you that Zel threatened to haunt me?"

"No."

"That is one reason why I watched her grave so carefully. There was a significance in what she said and in the way she said it, that made me think she contemplated some such dodge as this."

"But you finally abandoned the idea."

"Yes—when I had watched the grave a week, I decided that she meant what she said, and really believed that she could return to haunt me as a ghost, pure and simple."

"And now, you think you understand what she meant?"

"Yes. This is what she meant."

"She was a hard one, Nick."

"She is a hard one, inspector. If ever there existed a downright fiend in human form, she is that fiend, and I believe that only for that letter she would have found a way to carry out her old threats."

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE CORPSE.

At precisely two o'clock that same afternoon, a carriage stopped before the door of police headquarters, in Mulberry Street. Chick was on the box, and inside was Nick. He wore the disguise of "Old Thunderbolt," for reasons best known to himself.

Presently, the two inspectors, Byrnes and Williams, the former in citizen's dress, and the latter in full uniform, issued from the building and entered the carriage where Nick was awaiting them. Then it was driven away. The carriage stopped at the Municipal Building, in Brooklyn, where Superintendent Campbell, who had been notified by telephone, joined them.

In due time the little party reached the cemetery, and at last they stood beside the grave which was supposed to contain the body of Zelma.

Two workmen, connected with the cemetery, were there with their spades and picks, ready to proceed. Presently Superintendent Campbell made a sign, and the work began.

The three officers and the two detectives stood silently looking on, each, no doubt, wondering what manner of sight would unfold itself to their vision, when the work of excavating should be done, and the coffin should be laid open to their gaze.

At last the pick gave forth a hollow sound, which told them that the coffin had been reached.

Only a few moments were required to complete the preparations for opening it, and then the lid was taken off.

All knew, before the lid was removed, that the casket was not empty. It was much too heavy for that.

Old Thunderbolt looked puzzled, and Inspector Byrnes smiled when they realized that the grave was not tenantless, after all.

Could it be that they had been hoaxed?

Suddenly, and just before the lid was lifted, Nick's face cleared. He had guessed already the solution of the mystery.

Then the lid was thrown aside.

Immediately a cry of astonishment went up from the group of officers and detectives gathered about the open grave.

The face that they saw in the coffin was not Zel's, but that of a man; the same, no doubt, who had rescued her.

Everybody in the party except Nick looked puzzled.

But the great criminal investigator only smiled as he looked from face to face, in order to see what impression the strange denouement had made upon them.

Inspector Byrnes was the first one to speak.

"Well, Nick," he said, "how do you explain this?"

"Very simply."

"I suppose so; but how?"

Nick pointed at the body in the coffin.

"There lies the man whose wife Zel promised to become," he said. "Granting that all that I suspect is true, she was rescued from this grave exactly in accordance with the direction that she has given, and then, as soon as she had strength enough to strike, she murdered her preserver and buried him in her own coffin. Gentlemen, the woman, Zel, is alive and in New York, while we stand here at her supposed grave. She believes that she is absolutely secure, because, having murdered her rescuer—the only person who knew that she lived—she is confident that the world thinks her dead, and lying there."

Even the police officers, accustomed as they were to crime in all its phases, shuddered involuntarily when they thought of the Frankensteinish propensities of this human fiend, Zel.

"If your letter is correct, Nick," said Inspector Byrnes, "the corpse of this man has been here eleven days."

"Yes."

"And yet decomposition has scarcely begun."

"There are two reasons for that, inspector."

"What are they?" asked Superintendent Campbell.

"One very natural reason is, that the weather has been unusually cool, but the chief and most important reason is that the young man was struck dead, placed in the coffin, and covered with earth in a very short lapse of time. Atmospheric influences had no chance to play havoc with his body. Let us see how the crime was perpetrated. One would think that Zel could not carry deadly weapons with her to the grave."

"But it would be an easy matter for her to borrow one from the fellow she killed," said Inspector Williams. "The first thing is to find out the identity of this corpse. Time enough, then, to inquire how he was killed."

The body was at once taken from the coffin, and Chick proceeded to examine it, while the others stood looking on.

In the inside pocket of his coat were found several letters, addressed to Roger A. Merridale, Brooklyn, New York, and in the lower left-hand corner were the letters, "G. P. O.," meaning general post office.

The discovery gave them the man's name, but no hint whatever of his address.

It was evident that Merridale had desired to conceal his place of abode, and that he had made a practice of calling at the post office for his mail.

"I will give you Merridale's history in an hour after we return to the city, Carter," said Superintendent Campbell.

There is no surer way of inviting the police to ob-

tain one's record, than to call at the general post office of a large city for letters bearing no other address.

If the postal officials do not know the man who applies for letters in that way, a secret-service special is at once put upon his track.

When the desired information is procured, a copy is sent to the police department of the city, and the man is kept under surveillance or not, as the result of the investigation may suggest. Many a contemplated crime is nipped in the bud in that way; many a life saved; many a bank vault preserved intact.

There were a gold watch, a bunch of keys, seventeen dollars in money, a penknife, two handkerchiefs, and a revolver found in his pockets, besides the letters. His dress was that of a man in excellent circumstances. His clothing was of the finest quality; he wore a diamond stud in his shirt bosom, and a valuable ring of the same kind upon the little finger of his left hand.

In stature, he was below the medium height, and yet it had required some effort at crowding and bending to force him into the coffin that had been originally made for Zel. His features were regular and handsome, and he could not have been more than thirty years of age.

Everything suggested that the man had died instantly, and without a struggle, and for a long time even the astute officers were puzzled to explain the cause of his death.

Presently, however, Nick discovered the secret.

Imbedded in the man's neck, behind, and just where the fact was concealed by his curling hair, was a pin.

Nick pulled out the pin. It was of unusual size, and from the point, halfway to the head, it had been discolored by the application of some chemical which had doubtless been the cause of death, as the stab of the pin alone could not have killed him at the point where it had been imbedded in his flesh.

The letters told them nothing of importance, but, with the other things found upon his person, they were, of course, carefully preserved.

The main point, which had brought about the investigation, had been established.

Zel was not dead.

She had risen from the grave and was at large, for the purpose of carrying out her threat against the great detective, Nick Carter. She had already been eleven days at liberty, and Nick, who knew her so well, knew also that she would leave no stone unturned to make good her threats of vengeance upon him.

It was dark when Inspector Byrnes and Nick were again alone together in the former's office in Mulberry Street.

"Well, inspector, what do you think of it all?" asked Nick Carter.

"It is remarkable. She is a wonderful woman."

"She is."

"Do you fear her, Nick?"

"I appreciate her ability, and I dread her machinations against my wife. Fear, in its true sense, I think was left out of me when I was born."

"I think so, too. What do you suppose will be Zel's first move?"

"I haven't an idea."

"And in the meantime?"

"I shall look for her."

"Can you find her?"

"Perhaps not. If I do not, it will be the first failure of my life. Let me see that report that Superintendent Campbell gave us."

"Read it aloud, Nick."

Nick read:

"'Roger A. Merridale, short, light, handsome, twenty-nine or thirty years old, dresses expensively and somewhat flashily. Five feet five inches. Rooms at house of Mrs. De Plantois, in Montclair, New Jersey. Goes to Brooklyn for much of his mail matter. Receives some at Montclair. Seems to be straight. Has no associates and very few acquaintances. Is very proud and distant, when approached. Think his Brooklyn correspondents are those from whom he wishes to keep his real address for personal reasons. Has no active business so far as I can determine. Do not think that he need be watched.

"'GORDON, Spec'l.'"

"Not much in that, Nick."

"No, and yet it suggests considerable."

Suddenly Nick bounded from the chair in which he was sitting, and slapped his hand upon the table with an emphasis that made things rattle.

The inspector looked at him in astonishment.

"Well, what now?" he asked.

"Inspector, I know where Zel can be found."

"The devil you do!"

"Sure."

"Where?"

"At the house of Mrs. De Plantois, in Montclair, masquerading as Roger Merridale."

CHAPTER III.

ZEL'S DEFIANCE.

Nick's previous experience with Zel had posted him pretty well, as to the most probable move that she would make when freed from the grave, and was satisfied that nobody knew that she was alive.

She was as fertile in laying her plots, as she was in the use of poisons, and Nick had no doubt that she had planned everything connected with her resurrection with the same consummate skill that distinguished all that she did.

The place where Merridale lived, his manner of life, his habits, everything pertaining to him had, without doubt, been directed by her brain, she knowing that ultimately she would masquerade in that character.

It was ten o'clock on the following morning when Nick Carter rang the bell of Mrs. De Plantois' boarding house in Montclair.

He wore the dress of Old Thunderbolt—one with which he knew that Zel was acquainted, but he did not care if she did recognize him, if he could once more get her within reach.

She had so many subtle ways of avoiding the consequences of her crimes that the detective was firmly determined that she should have no further chance with him.

A matronly appearing woman opened the door, and Nick, carpetbag in hand, bowed profoundly.

"Kin I ax ef Mister Merridale lives here, mum?" he said.

"Yes, sir; he lives here."

"Kin I see him?"

"I will send up your card."

"My what?"

"Your card."

"Oh, I see; yes! Well, mum, I don't blame yew any."

"Blame me! for what?"

"Yew thought I was stan'in' far a prize in the cattle show at the county fair, didn't yew, an' hed forgot the keerd what they tie to the ears of the oxen, hey? Waal, I ain't. I'm plain Josh Juniper, an' I wanter see my nephy."

"Oh, is Mr. Merridale your nephew?"

"He be."

"I will tell him at once."

"Thanky."

"Sit down and I will send to his room directly."

"Is he in?"

"Yes—that is, I think so."

"Yew ain't sartin?"

"Well, no; I haven't seen him go out, and he usually is in at this time of day."

"Whar be his room, mum?"

"Right at the head of the stairs; the back room."

"Thanky. I'm his Uncle Josh."

"So you said."

"Yes'm. I kinder wanter s'prise 'im."

"How?"

"By walkin' in onto him."

"Oh!"

"An' ef yew'll jes' stan' right at the bottom of the stairs an' listen, yew'll hear him holler with surprise in about a minute."

"Very well; that's his door there."

"Thanky."

Nick went hurriedly up the stairs, and tapped gently at the door.

There was no response, and presently he put his hand upon the knob, and abruptly walked in.

The room was empty.

"Gone, by gosh!" ejaculated Nick, in a voice that Mrs. De Plantois could hear.

"Has he gone out?" she exclaimed, following him into the room; "that is too bad."

Nick was at the bureau, for upon it his sharp eyes had quickly detected the presence of two letters. One of them was addressed to Mrs. De Plantois, and the other to "Nick Carter, detective, alias many pseudonyms."

"Say, mum," he said, turning to the woman, "he's gone, an' he's left a letter fur yew an' one for me."

"For you, also?" she exclaimed. "I thought he did not expect you."

"Waal, so'd I; but yew see, mum, that nephy of mine's a mighty pert young feller, an' don't yew furgit it, nuther; yew read yew're letter, an' I'll read mine."

Nick was, however, in no haste to read his own letter, but he did have considerable curiosity to know what the woman's letter contained.

While pretending to read his message, he, in reality, watched Mrs. De Plantois narrowly.

It was a very short note that she read, and Nick saw that it contained a bill.

"He has gone for good," the woman said, looking up.

"Git out! Is that so?"

"Yes. Hasn't he told you?"

"No."

"Well, he has paid his bill and gone."

"Whar to?"

"He does not say."

"Whar ye goin' tew send his letters?"

"He says that he will call for them."

"Oh, say!"

"Well?"

"It's kinder funny that he knew I wuz comin', ain't it?"

"Yes."

"An' didn't say nothin' 'bout whar I c'u'd find him, either."

"Yes."

"A feller would think he didn't wanter see his Uncle Josh, hey?"

"It does look so."

"Jest es though he wanted to keep away from me, hey?"

"I am afraid so."

"So'm I; say!"

"Well?"

"The boy's in trouble o' some kind."

"Oh, I hope not!"

"He is; say!"

"Well?"

"I kim down here purpose to help him. I know'd all about his fix."

"It is too bad that he has gone."

"It be, by Jupiter. Say!"

"Well?"

"Did he look kinder queer lately?"

"Yes—very."

"Pale like, hey?"

"Positively white."

"Didn't say much, did he?"

"Almost nothing."

"How long's that been goin' on?"

"About two weeks."

"Waal, I'll tell yew a secret."

"Do."

"He got into trouble 'bout two weeks ago."

"I am sorry."

"I know'd you be. Yew see, he signed another man's name to a check."

"Forgery!"

"Waal, yes; that's wot they call it in court. I think 'twar jest furgitfulness."

"It is too bad."

"Waal, one thing's lucky."

"What is that?"

"It was my name that he signed."

"Oh!"

"An' I jest kim up to tell him that I'd furgive an' furgit, ef he wouldn't do it ag'in, an' I brought a few dollars along with me tew guv him for tryin' tew be good in the fewtoor."

"You are a good man."

"Waal, he's a good boy, ef he warn't so cussed—beg yewer parding, da—— I mean tew say blamed furgitful sometimes. I love that boy, Miss Planter, an' I want yew tew do me a favor."

"What is it?"

"Mebby he'll come back."

"I'm afraid not."

"Or send fur his letters, 'r suthin."

"It may be."

"I think mebby he will."

"Well, if he does I will tell him that you were here, and that you want to see——"

"Gosh, no!"

"Eh?"

"Bless yer heart, Miss Planter, the boy'd light out fur furrin' parts afore yew c'u'd ketch yewer breath."

"Ah!"

"Don't ye tell him nothin' of the kind."

"No."

"No. Ef he axes 'bout the letter he left fur me, tell him yew don't know nothin' 'bout it."

"Well?"

"Jest find out whar he is, ef yew kin, and write tew me, will yew?"

"Certainly."

"Thanky; I'll jest write my address on t'other side of yewer letter."

"There!" he said, when it was done. "I wanter find that boy jest to save him from committin' any more o' them acts of furgitfulness, an', ef yew kin help me, I hope yew will."

"I certainly will."

"Thanky. He was here last night, wasn't he?"

"I think so. I saw him about eight, but he may have gone out again right away."

"That's so. Waal, good mornin', Miss Planter."

Nick was soon again in the street.

"Foxy, awfully foxy, Zel," he muttered.

He knew that in some way Zel had learned that her grave had been visited, and that Nick Carter knew she was alive.

The letter which he had not yet read would doubtless tell him all, but he preferred not to read it until he was back again in his office in Liberty Street, where the sign, "T. Bolt, Detective," was over the door.

Once there, he spread the document open before him.

The communication was, in every respect, characteristic of Zelma, and we will give it in full:

"My Esteemed and Inquisitive Shadow: Again we are in the arena, and this time you will be overcome. Heretofore I have worked slowly. Hereafter, my efforts against you shall be both swift and sure.

"I shall strike at once, and where you least expect it. You shall feel the force of my hatred ere you have grasped the contents of this letter.

"I thought to work in the dark and secretly, believing that you thought me truly dead.

"An accident took me to the cemetery where you were, with your friends, peering into the coffin, where, for thirty days, I rested.

"How you discovered the cheat I do not know, but I do know that the address of Roger Merridale will be ascertained, and that you will be shrewd enough to guess at once where I will be. Therefore I abandon this disguise at once.

"You are shrewd, Nick. If you weren't so honest—such a fool, in fact, with all of your smartness—how I could love you. You are the only man that I ever saw, except Doctor Quartz, that was worthy of me. He grew old, and you are honest! A great mistake! Knowing that you would despise my love, I hate you. But for you, I would now be enjoying the fortune of Clarita Downing; for that I also hate you, to say nothing of the other causes I have, for the same feeling.

"I hate you! I hate your wife! I hate Chick! I hate Patsy! I hated Bertha Mortimer, whom Chick was to marry, and you may tell him that her death was due more to me than to natural causes! I hate Clarita Downing! And I hate a few others.

"All whom I hate shall die!

"You know me. You know that I mean what I say.

"The great detective is warned as well as defied!

"I know one other Hindu secret which shall accomplish all that I seek. Beware of it! Beware of me!

"Mockingly yours, Zel."

CHAPTER IV.

ZEL'S FIRST MOVE.

Such was the manner in which the great detective was defied by Zelma, and his position was by no means an enviable one.

Zelma was a woman, who seemed to be more than human in her propensities for evil.

But Nick was fully aware of her astuteness in the use of drugs, and he had caused a watch to be placed over her body, as well as over the grave wherein she was buried.

That had been kept up for a week, and then abandoned; and lo! at the expiration of thirty days she had arisen as from the dead, slain her rescuer, and gone forth again for the commission of new and greater crimes, and with the avowed intention of murdering Nick Carter and his entire family.

For himself, the famous detective knew no fear; but for those who were near and dear to him there was cause for anxiety.

He could not tell where Zel would strike first, nor whom she would select for her first victim.

He placed the letter in his pocket, and went home. Patsy met him at the door, and there was an expression of joy in his eyes, which Nick could not help remarking.

"What's the matter, Patsy?" he asked.

"Sure I'm so glad that yer not hurt, after all, master," was Patsy's reply.

"Not hurt! what do you mean?"

"The message said that you had been pizened, but that you wouldn't die."

"What message?"

"The message that came about two hours ago."

"Who brought it?"

"A cop."

"What was it?"

"The message?"

"Yes."

"Sure the cop said that ye'd been pizened by a woman, an' they were afraid ye might die. He said that ye'd sent for your wife, an' he was to take her right there."

"Where?"

"To the station house."

"Did she go?"

"No."

"Thank God!"

"She was goin', but jest as she was leavin' the house, Mister Chick came in."

"Just in time."

"Yes."

"Well? Go on."

"Mister Chick said he'd go, an' Mrs. Carter was bound to go with him."

"Well?"

"He wouldn't hear of it."

"Good for Chick."

"He said if you needed her, he'd send for her right away. She was satisfied with that, an' so she let him go alone."

"Good! Now, I will go to her."

"Why, sir, she hasn't come back yet."
"Hasn't come back yet!"
"No, sir."
"Where has she gone?"
"Why, to see you."
"To see me! Didn't you just say that she agreed not to go until Chick sent for her?"
"Yes, sir."
"Well; then what do——"
"He did send for her."
"What!"
"He did send for her."
"When?"
"About an hour ago."
"Who came, then? Speak quick, now, Patsy."
"The cop."
"The same one?"
"Yes."
"Do you know him?"
"No."
"What was he?"
"A roundsman."
"What did he say when he came back?"
"Nothing."
"Well, what then?"
"He brought a note."
"From Chick."
"Yes, sir."
"Did you see it?"
"I've got it now."
"Let me have it."
"Here it is."
Nick seized the piece of paper, and read:

"ETHEL: Come at once. I sent a carriage. Nick is worse. CHICK."

For once in his life Nick was thoroughly astounded.
"Did you see the carriage, Patsy?"
"Yes, sir. It came to the door, and stood there while the cop came in."
"What was it?"
"A coupé."
"A private one?"
"Yes, sir."
"You did not think that there was anything wrong?"
"No, sir. I thought——"
"Yes. I know. Chick left two hours ago?"
"About that—yes, sir."
"And my wife an hour ago?"
"Yes, sir."
"And where did she think she was to be taken?"
"To the station house in Thirtieth Street."
"That is where Chick went?"
"That is where he meant to go."
"Did he go in a carriage?"
"No, sir."
"Wasn't the carriage there, then?"
"Yes, sir."
"And he wouldn't take it?"
"No, sir. He started off afoot, on a run."
"And the coupé? Did that start off also?"
"Yes, sir; right away."
"Did it follow Chick?"
"No, sir. It went the other way."
"Did you notice the policeman's number?"
"Yes, sir."
"Good! What was it?"
"Fifty-four twenty."
"You would know him again?"
"You bet."
"Take my card. Run to the station house in Thirtieth Street. Tell Captain Reilly that you want to see number fifty-four twenty at once, and that it will be a favor to me if he will let him return here with you."
"Yes, sir."
"Run!"
"You bet."
The boy was off like a shot, and Nick sat down to think.

To act hastily in a crisis like that which he was now brought face to face, he knew would be worse than useless.

He must go slowly and surely.

That the enticing of Ethel, his wife, from her home was the work of Zel, he did not doubt. Indeed, had she not warned him that she would begin to make her talons felt almost before he had mastered the contents of her letter of defiance to him?

She had kept her word, and she had played the game with the most consummate skill.

Ethel was a true detective's wife, and could not have been enticed from her home by any ordinary means. Yet, when the messenger was an officer who claimed to be attached to the Nineteenth Precinct, and a member of Captain Reilly's command, she had felt that there could be but little doubt of the authenticity of the message that he had brought. Chick had, however, arrived in time to prevent her from going with the bogus policeman, for bogus he was. Of that there was no doubt.

At that point arose the greatest puzzle of all: How had Zel managed to keep Chick from returning? The note, purporting to have been written by him, was a very clever forgery. So clever, indeed, that Ethel was doubtless deceived.

The schemers had permitted an hour to pass between the time when Chick departed, and that which brought their messenger back again, with the note that was supposed to come from him.

Ethel was gone, and was doubtless in Zel's power for the second time in her life. It was a horrible thought, and yet, for the moment, there was absolutely nothing for Nick to do but wait. To rush aimlessly about the streets could do no good. No one knew that better than Nick.

He must wait and think.

"I cannot believe that she has managed to get Chick into her power in broad daylight," Nick muttered. "In some way, he has been led off on a false scent, while the rest of the plan was working, and therefore he will return before long. There is nothing for me to do now but wait."

Wait he did.

By and by Patsy came, accompanied by the officer, No. 5420.

"Sit down, Dan," said Nick, who recognized the policeman. "I will be with you in a minute."

Then, motioning to Patsy to follow him, he went into the back room.

"Well, Pat?" he said.
"'Tain't him, sir."
"I thought not."
"This is Dan Murphy."
"Yes."

"I've know'd him ever since I was a kid."
"He couldn't fool you if he tried, could he?"
"Not much."
"Good!"
Nick returned to the parlor.
"Dan, where were you two hours and a half ago?" he asked.
"At home, sir."
"Where do you live?"
"In Twenty-fourth Street."
"Have you lost anything to-day?"
"Yes, sir; my helmet."
"When and how?"
"I was asleep."
"Yes."
"A feller came to the house, and told my wife that he had come for my helmet."
"'What helmet?' said she.
"'The one he wanted me to clean.'
"'He's asleep,' said my wife.
"'That's all right,' said the feller; 'Dan wanted me to take the thing and clean it while he was snoozing. It's the one he wore home to-day.'
"Well, my wife went and got the hat, and let him take it, and the cuss forgot to bring it back."
"Had you told anybody that you wanted it cleaned?"
"Yes, that's the funny part of it."
"How so?"
"When I woke up my wife told me about it. I had asked Jimmy Turton, several days ago, to clean it some day, and I supposed he'd sent for it."
"Well?"
"I went to Jimmy's, and he hadn't sent for the helmet, and knew nothing about it."
"So you're a hat out."
"That's about the size of it."
"Could your wife describe the man who came for it?"
"That's another funny point."
"Why?"
"She swears it was Jimmy."
"Oh, she does, eh?"
"Yes."
"And what do you think?"
"Well, I've known Jimmy for ten years. He says he don't know anything about it, and I believe him."
"Then you think your wife was deceived?"
"I do."

CHAPTER V.

ETHEL'S DANGER.

"Probably she was deceived, Dan, and yet it will do no harm for you to find out for certain."
"Of course."
"I want to find the man who wore your hat to-day."
"So do I."
"Well, if you do find him, don't make a move until you see me, will you?"
"No, sir."
"Thanks."
The officer left, and Nick immediately began preparations to go out also. He had resolved not to wait any longer for Chick. He was in the midst of his work of putting on a disguise, when he heard the front door open.
He knew instantly that it was Chick.
With one bound he reached the stairs, and beheld his young assistant laboriously mounting the steps.
"What's the matter, Chick?" he exclaimed.
"Thumped," replied Chick.
"When?"
"Soon after I went out."
"Where?"
"On the head."
"No—I mean——"
"Oh! Corner Thirtieth Street and Sixth Avenue."
"Who hit you?"
"A nigger, they said."
"Who said?"
"The duffers standing around who saw him do it and then let 'im escape."
"He did escape?"
"Clean."
"He hit you hard, eh?"
"Laid me out till just now. I was taken to the hospital. I think the coon meant to settle me."
"No doubt of it."
"Well, Ethel's all right, anyhow. I thought it might be a lay for her, and so I wouldn't let her go out."
"She went, though."
"What!"
"They sent for her again."
"Again!"
"Yes."
"After they slugged me?"
"Yes."
"Whew!"
"Somebody wrote a note to her and forged your name. She thought it was all right, and went."
"Then she is gone."
"She is."
"And in Zel's power."
"Nobody else would dare to try such a game."
"That's so."
"I'm going out now."
"Where?"
"To see a hatter."
"Eh?"
"A hatter named Turton."
"I know I'm rather dazed, Nick, but confound it——"
"Exactly. Somebody stole Dan Murphy's helmet. He had asked a hatter named Turton to clean it. Dan's wife thinks Turton was the man who called for it. I'm going to see him."
"Oh!"
Nick was about to speak again when the doorbell rang. Patsy darted to the door, and opened it.
A bootblack, box and all, dirty and ingenuous-looking, stood upon the threshold.
"'Ere's a letter," he said.
Patsy took the letter; also the boy. He brought them both inside of the door, and closed it. Then, telling the boy to wait, he handed the letter to Nick.
The detective opened it.
He knew instinctively what it contained, or rather who it was from.
Opening it, he read:

"NICK CARTER: Your wife is in my power. I may be induced to spare her. It depends upon you. She is now unconscious, under the influence of one of my potent drugs, which, however, will do her no harm, if the proper antidote is applied at the right time. You can say whether she is to live or die. The best physician in this

city could not save her if I delivered her into your hands now, just as she is. He would pronounce her dead; but she is not.

"I have a proposition to make to you. I know that you are celebrated for keeping your word. I am troubled with the same affliction.

"Meet me to-night, under the memorial arch in Washington Park, at eleven o'clock. Come unarmed, and be prepared to accompany me wherever I may choose to take you. I will then make terms with you for the deliverance of your wife.

"If you bring others with you, I will not be seen. If you seek to arrest me, or to injure me, your wife will die. If you kill me while she is in her present condition, she will not live. You know me!

"I will accept your appearance at the spot named, and alone, as a promise that you will comply with my conditions. If you break them, you know the consequences.

"For my part, I promise that you shall not be injured in any way, and that when our conference is over, you may return to your own home as well as you now are.

"It may be that you can save the life of your wife, but I will not tell you how, until to-night.

"Remember, she is already beyond your aid, even though she were at this moment in her own room at your home. You know me! ZEL."

When Nick looked up from the reading of Zel's letter, his face had the set, fierce look of one who had decided a momentous question which is fraught with great danger.

"Boy," he said, "where did you get this letter?"

"On de corner, boss."

"Who gave it to you?"

"A woman, boss."

"What did she say to you?"

"Tole me ter brung it here, an' guv me a shiner."

"A dime?"

"Yep. She said you'd guv me anodder one."

"I will. Did she want an answer?"

"Nope."

"Did she go away when she gave you the letter?"

"Nope."

"What did she do?"

"Watched me till I rung de bell."

"And then?"

"Well, den, I don't know, see? Cos de bloke here wot uster be shinin' fur a-living' as well as me, yanked me t'rough de door so quick dat I couldn't tell wot she done; see?"

"Here's your dime. You may go now."

"T'anks."

"Chick," said the detective, when the boy had gone, "read that."

Chick did so.

Then he looked up.

"Are you going?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's the only way."

"Perhaps not."

"Zel has told the truth."

"The truth isn't one of her many accomplishments."

"I believe that she has told the truth."

"And you have decided to go?"

"I have."

"She has sworn to kill you."

"I know it."

"And Ethel, and Patsy, and me."

"Yes."

"This is only a snare to get you into her power with Ethel."

"I believe that."

"And yet you will go?"

"And yet I will go."

"You will take me?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because, then, I could not accomplish my purpose."

"What is that?"

"I have one; that is enough. I am going; and, mark my words, this female fiend will rue the day that she sent for me."

"You will accept her conditions?"

"Up to a certain point, yes."

"And after that —"

"Circumstances must decide."

"What shall I do?"

"Nothing."

"That is hard work."

"I know it. Wait!"

"Well?"

"Dress yourself as an old tramp. Go through the scuttle to the roof of the house."

"Correct."

"Go over the roofs to the corner, and manage to get down to the street through Finnigan's saloon."

"Yes."

"Do it without being seen, if you can. Then go to the park, where she wants me to meet her."

"All right."

"You will get there an hour before dark."

"Yes."

"Pick out a bench near the arch."

"Ah!"

"Don't leave it. Stay there and watch. See everything. Notice the most trivial details, but do nothing but notice."

"Yes."

"I will be there at eleven."

"Will you go unarmed?"

"Except for the barkers up my sleeve. I will have those."

"Correct."

"When I leave the arch with her, follow."

"Yes."

"But do not keep us in sight."

"Eh?"

"I will have a pocketful of rice, which I will soak before I start out. It will make no noise as I drop it on the pavement, and the wind will not scatter it. Follow the rice, not me."

"Good! Good!"

"Somebody else will follow us and will be looking for you, or for any person whom I may have put on the scent to dog us."

"I see."

"Zel is cute; she is shrewd; she would not make this appointment with me, without taking every precaution to avoid being trapped. She knows that she can expect no mercy when she falls into my hands again."

"Exactly."

"Your work is to find out what those precautions are, and who it is that is in her confidence. Wherever the rice leads you, follow."

"Well, rather!"

"When you reach the place where you are satisfied that I am, wait where you can hear my signal, if I call for you."

"And the signal will be what?"

"Two pistol shots in quick succession. I can use the barkers for that if I have need to do so."

"Correct!"

"If I signal, I will want you quick."

"I will come."

"Do nothing—absolutely nothing, unless you get the signal."

"I will obey."

"Now, Chick, this is the most serious expedition of our lives. More depends upon it than upon anything that we ever undertook. Ethel's life is at stake, and I may lose mine in the work before me to-night; but that work must be done. If I go under—if this she-devil should get the best of me, I leave it all in your hands. Good-by, boy, and God bless you! Go, now. Remember my instructions. Obey them to the letter, and, if we never meet again in life, well, God bless you, Chick. Now go."

And Chick, without a word, but with a suspicious moisture in his eyes, went.

CHAPTER VI.

THE TRAMP AND THE RICE.

The disguise which Nick Carter chose for the strange expedition in which he was to meet Zel was that of the countryman detective, Old Thunderbolt.

He did not don it for the purpose of remaining unknown, for that make-up was as familiar to the wily Zel as an everyday companion could be.

He used it simply because it was his favorite disguise, and because among the capacious pockets of that huge coat he could conceal more paraphernalia for quick changes than in any other costume in his possession.

Circumstances might arise which would force him to work one or more of his marvelously quick and impenetrable changes, and he went prepared.

At a quarter before eleven he was at the arch. There was nobody in sight except an old tramp, who was asleep on a bench.

The tramp was, of course, Chick.

But Nick was not deceived by the fact that there was nobody else in view. He knew perfectly well that Zel would not permit the spot to remain unguarded, or allow him to approach it without being carefully observed, and he did not doubt that he had been followed from the moment that he left his house.

He could, of course, have ascertained the fact to a certainty, had he chosen to take precautions to do so when he started out. But he did not care whether he was followed or not. If he was, he preferred to so conduct himself, that whoever followed would be satisfied by appearances that he had taken Zel at her word, and was willing to put her to the test.

Chick, being so early upon the scene, would not be noticed, and his six hours near the arch, in the character of the tramp, would give him immunity from espionage.

In one of the pockets of Nick's coat was a rubber bag, and in it were several quarts of rice that had been thoroughly soaked. He could scatter the rice as he walked, by the simple act of pressing his elbow to his side from time to time.

It required little rice to afford Chick the means of following the trail, and Nick was not obliged to use enough to attract the attention of others.

At eleven o'clock, precisely, the figure of a woman approached the detective from Fifth Avenue, and he knew by the graceful carriage, and the quick, pantherlike tread, that it was Zel.

She came directly to the arch, and, when within twenty feet of the detective, she stopped.

"You are here, Nick Carter," she said.

"Yes," replied Nick, "I am here."

"Are you not afraid?"

"Afraid of what?"

"Of me."

"No."

"You feel no fear?"

"None."

"Not for yourself, perhaps; but for others, you fear."

"I do not fear you, Zel."

"Are you armed?"

"My pockets are as devoid of weapons as that arch."

"That is an evasion."

"Perhaps it is."

"Are you armed?"

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"So am I."

"That is not in accordance with the conditions."

"Yet I am here to do as you say, up to a certain point."

"Why did you bring weapons?"

"To use, if necessary."

"Fool!"

"Why?"

"Did I not tell you that if you disobeyed me, your wife should die?"

"Yes."

"What if I leave you now?"

"You cannot."

"Cannot! Why?"

"I would kill you before you had taken a step."

"Fool again!"

"Again, why?"

"In killing me, you would kill your wife."

"But I would also kill you, Zel."

"Ethel will die, without my active effort in her behalf; nobody else can save her."

"I believe that. I know you well enough to believe that."

"Then why would you kill me, if I sought to leave?"

"Need you ask?"

"Yes."

"Very well; it is simply because I do believe you."

"Why did you come here armed?"

"Because I wished to do so."

"Will you deliver your weapons to me, now?"

"No."

"Then I will not make terms with you."

"In that case you will cease to live."

"Do you defy me, Nick Carter?"

"No; I simply make a statement."

"You committed yourself to my terms in coming here."

"I committed myself to nothing."

"Very well, our conference is at an end."

"Do you mean that, Zel?"

Nick's voice was calm when he asked the question, but it was that sort of calmness which precedes a storm.

Zel felt it, evidently.

She hesitated.

"Wait!" she said. "Will you make me a promise now?"

"What is it?"

"That you will not use your weapons?"

"I will not use them unless driven to do so."

"By what means?"

"By any effort on your part to break the agreement which your letter made with me."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, with one further qualification."

"Name it."

"Unless I deem their use necessary to save the life of my wife."

"They will not avail you in that way."

"Then I will not use them."

"Do you mean that?"

"I certainly do."

"Did any one come here with you?"

"No."

"Were you followed?"

"Not unless at your instigation."

"Is not Chick in this thing?"

"You know that Chick was sent to the hospital with a broken head."

"Yes, I know it."

"Then why ask?"

"I cannot believe that you would come to this tryst alone."

"I assure you that I did."

"By lifting my hand, I could kill you, Nick Carter."

"Then why not do it?"

"I am not ready, yet."

"No?"

"No."

"Waiting may work your own downfall, Zel."

"Bah!"

"Come, we waste time. You were to take me somewhere."

"Yes."

"Where?"

"To the house where Ethel is."

"Let us start."

"You must first make me another promise."

"Name it."

"That you will not seek to touch her in any way without my permission."

"I promise, with the same reservation I made in regard to my weapons."

"It is sufficient."

"Then let us go."

"Come."

They started away across the park toward South Fifth Avenue.

The tramp appeared to be fast asleep on the bench. His head hung far over on one shoulder, and just a suspicion of a snore escaped him. It was not a sound that could be heard more than three feet away, and yet he certainly snored.

When Nick and Zel moved away the tramp continued to snore. He did not raise his head, or pay any heed to what was passing around him. His position was such that his eyes could by no possibility watch the direction that the pair took. When they had crossed the park and passed out of sight, he still sat there as immovable as ever. Five minutes passed, and he did not move.

Then a figure stole from beneath a stoop, across the street from that side of the park.

It glided forward, and presently walked boldly toward the tramp, and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Go ter blazes!" muttered the tramp, without looking up.

Again the man slapped him on the shoulders, more soundly than before.

"I shay, coppie, can't yer let a feller shleep, hey?" demanded the tramp.

"I'm not a cop," said the man.

"Then who the devil are you, hey? An' watcher mean by disturbin' a gent from his slumbers at this yere time o' night, hey?"

"I want to ask you a question."

"Go ter blazes!" and the tramp composed himself for another nap.

"I'm lost," continued the man.

"Go ter blazes!"

"I want to find Bleecker Street."

"Go ter blazes!"

"I'll give you a dime, if you'll——"

"What's that!" cried the tramp, springing to his feet as suddenly as though impelled by an electric shock.

"Watcher say, boss?"

"I said that I would give——"

"Yes—yes. Pay in advance?"

"Certainly. Here's your dime."

"Wanter go ter Bleecker Street?"

"Yes."

"'Cross the park, see? First street you come ter, see? That's Bleecker, see? Good night."

"Where are you going?"

"Fur a drink. Good night."

The tramp hurried away, while the stranger watched him earnestly as far as he could see him.

"No fear of that fellow," he muttered presently.

"I didn't think there was, but it is well enough to be on the safe side."

Then he turned away and went in the direction that Nick and Zel had taken, walking rapidly.

The tramp did not go far. From behind a convenient corner he saw the man who had accosted him turn away. Then he began to work.

In five minutes he was a perfect specimen of a young Frenchman such as frequent that quarter of the city around South Fifth Avenue. Then he started across the park walking just unsteadily enough to give an observer the idea that he had drunk a trifle too much, but was perfectly able to take care of himself.

He passed through the arch and along the path that Nick had taken with Zel. Every once in a while he dropped the cane that he carried.

When he stooped to pick it up, it was with a low chuckle of satisfaction.

But the reader knows that the gratification was caused more by finding grains of rice than by the recovery of the cane.

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE PROPOSAL.

Zel led Nick across the park and down South Fifth Avenue past Bleecker Street.

Presently they paused before a house which was dark, and seemingly deserted.

"We enter here," said Zel.

"I am ready," replied Nick.

"Ethel is in this house."

"Take me to her."

"In good time. I must talk with you first. Come!"

They entered by the basement way, passing through a dark hallway, which, however, Nick immediately illumined with his bull's-eye lantern, which he had not forgotten to bring.

Zel started when the light flashed along the narrow corridor, but she said nothing.

Then they ascended the stairs to the next floor, and entered the room which had doubtless once been called the back parlor.

Zel lighted the gas, and motioned to Nick to be seated.

"Nick Carter," she said, after she had lighted a cigarette, "do you know why I have brought you here?"

"I do not."

"Nor why I have proposed to make terms with you?"

"I do not."

"You know that I have sworn to kill you?"

"Yes."

"And all who are connected with you?"

"Yes."

"You believe that I will keep my oath?"

"If you can—yes."

"I can."

"That remains to be determined."

"It does."

"Proceed."

"I wished this talk with you."

"Yes."

"And was willing to declare a truce, to which I will adhere long enough to carry out my wishes."

"Well?"

"I am willing to compromise with you."

"Indeed!"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"You will think it a strange way."

"Perhaps so."

"I am willing to spare Ethel Carter, Chick, Patsy, and all against whom I have sworn vengeance."

"Indeed! There is hope for you, then?"

"Yes, if you will help me. I am willing to forswear my wicked ways, and from this moment to become a good woman."

"I fear it is too late for that, Zel."

"No—it is never too late to mend."

"Go on, please."

"By a simple act, you can save all against whom I have sworn vengeance, and at the same moment, nay, in the same breath, you can transform me from a devil, or, as you have often called me—a fiend—to a good woman."

"I cannot comprehend what you mean, Zel."

"Answer me, Nick Carter; am I beautiful?"

"You are."

"How beautiful?"

"If the wickedness in your heart were not reflected in your face, you would be the most beautiful woman I ever saw."

"Even more beautiful than Clarita Downing?"

"Yes."

"Do you not love beauty?"

"I admire it."

"If the wickedness were eradicated from my heart, I would be your ideal of beauty?"

"Of mere beauty, yes."

"If you were free—if you had never loved, could you then love me, Nick Carter?"

"No."

The word was decisive, and the woman gasped and turned pale.

"Not even then?" she murmured.

"No; not even then."

"Nick Carter, with all my sins, I am only thirty years old. I have been loved by many, but I never saw the man for whose love I cared, until I saw you. I knew that my passion was hopeless, and I sought to kill you in order to forget you. I have brought you here now to make terms."

"I will listen."

"You will listen. You grant that much?"

"Yes; there can be no harm in that.'

"You love your wife?"

"Certainly."

"You wish to save her?"

"Certainly."

"And to do so you would make almost any sacrifice?"

"Yes."

"Would you sacrifice your love?"

"I do not understand."

"Would you desert her?"

"Would I desert her?"

"Yes; for one year only. Tell her anything you please. Be mine for one year. At the end of that time, I will release you, and you may return. Just for one year—only one year. Then I will die. I will take one of my own poisons and you will be free and forever rid of Zel."

She started to her feet, and then sank upon her knees before him. She was almost crazed with excitement, while Nick sat before her, as cold as a stone, as immovable as a statue—a stoic.

"Oh, my God, what happiness!" she cried. "Wait! let me finish. Let me paint the picture in my own way."

"I am waiting."

Nick's voice was calm and cold, and gave her no promise, but she did not seem to notice it.

"Listen!" she cried. "You need not love me; I do not ask you to love me; I know that you never will—that you cannot. But pretend! Pretend that you do love me, for just one year! I will allow myself to be deceived, I will teach myself to believe that you do love me—that you are mine and mine alone. Ethel will be saved. She will return to your house. She will wait there for you in ignorance of the compact that you have made with me to save her life. She will never know of your unfaithfulness, and at the end of a year you can return to her, and be happy in your own way, after having shown me a glimpse of heaven; the only glimpse that I will ever get. She will never know. Nobody but you and I will know, and when, at the end of a year, you return to her, I will be dead—yes, really and truly dead, and the secret will remain with you alone."

She bent forward still farther and sought to grasp him by the hands, but he avoided her.

"Listen," she whispered intensely, "you do not believe that I will, indeed, die. I will take the poison in your presence, and when I am dead, you shall stab me to the heart with a dagger. Then you will know that I am dead. We will go away—far away, for that one year. We will go to India. I will teach you the mysteries in which I am learned, and together we will master new and greater ones. You can make any excuse that you will, for your absence. You can even write home to your wife as often as you please, but you must never mention her name to me; never let me see that which alas, I know, that you do not love me. I will deceive myself. You shall be my king—my god! And if, after the expiration of that one year, I go to perdition, I will not care, for I will have known happiness—I will have had one year of joy. Oh, Nick, do you not see how I worship you, since I am willing to accept a hollow pretense for the reality—that I am willing to force myself to believe that you love me, when I know that you do not and will not? Give me your word that you will do this; promise me that you agree to all that I say, and I will take you into the room where Ethel is now lying, to all appearance a corpse, and you shall administer the potion, which, in five minutes, will restore her to life and vitality, as perfect as that which she enjoyed when you saw her last. Refuse, and as I live now, as surely as you sit there, stoical and immovable, she shall die, nor can all the science in the world save her, for the drug, under whose influences she now lies, is known only to myself. No one lives, not even in India, who could bring her back to life without my aid.

"If you should bind me hand and foot, here and now; if you should singe me with hot irons, pull my hair out one by one, draw my teeth, tattoo my flesh with nitric acid, and torture me with every manner of inconceivable agony, I would not change my determination. I would let her die, for I would know that in so doing I would get all the revenge I seek, and that to the torture which your heart would endure, the agony to my flesh would be as nothing.

"It is not much that I ask, Nick. Only for one year. Be mine, my very own, for that length of time, then go back to her and be happy. Will you consent to this? You have said that you would sacrifice almost anything to save Ethel. I ask you to sacrifice one year of your life, to give it up to me. Think well before you reply. I will keep my word in every detail, neither will I alter my determination in one iota."

She rose, and stood before him, pale and pleading.

But Nick did not move—neither did the expression of his face alter in the least.

"Come! What say you?" asked Zel.

"Where is Ethel now?" he inquired.

"In there."

"Take me to her."

"For what purpose?"

"That I may read my answer to your demands from her face."

"It is expressionless."

"To you, perhaps; not to me."

"I will take you to her."

"Do."

"You will answer, then?"

"Yes."

"You will consent, Nick Carter. The sight of her will force you to do so. Come!"

She led the way into the adjoining room.

There, upon a couch, was Ethel, and whoever looked upon her would have pronounced her a corpse. Corpse-like she was. Her flesh was cold, and her features were pale and set, like the features of one who is dead.

Looking upon her, Nick felt the ice at his heart. Never had he been so near mad as then.

But he was strangely calm as he turned to Zel, and said coldly:

"My answer to you is No."

CHAPTER VIII.

CHANGED FROM MAN TO FIEND.

Zel did not start, as she might have been expected to do, when Nick uttered the word "No."

She only smiled as she murmured:

"Wait; do not be hasty."

"I have decided."

"You will not consent?"

"No."

"Is that the answer that you read in her face?"

"Yes."

"Where do you see it?"

"In the purity of her features; in the soul that shines through her eyes, even though they are closed. Zel, with all your faults, you are a woman; with all your sins you know what purity is. You say that you love me."

"Aye, to madness."

"I believe you; I cannot do otherwise."

"Thank you for that much."

"Put yourself in Ethel's place and herself in yours. Transpose identities with her for a moment. Imagine yourself lying there, conscious of all that is taking place by your side. Imagine yourself my wife. Picture in your mind another woman standing here with me as you are now. Would you have me, your husband whom you love, consent to the inhuman proposal that has been made to me, even to save your life? Would you, Zel?"

"Oh, no—no—no—no! Oh, Heaven, no! A thousand times no!"

"Then have you not answered yourself? Could I ever look upon her face again, if I consented to what you ask? I might gain my own selfish ends, and try to be happy at the expiration of that year of which you speak, but I hold her happiness so far above my own that I have not even considered your proposal for one moment, even though I appeared to do so. My answer is No!"

"Is that final?"

"It is final."

"You know that you will be her murderer?"

"Argument cannot move me, Zel."

"You scorn me?"

"Well, yes; frankly, I do."

"You despise me?"

"As I would a viper. These are harsh words, but I say them coolly."

"Ethel shall die."

"It may be."

"It will be!"

"She will not die alone."

"Ah, you threaten me!"

"Yes."

Zel laughed. It was the same reckless laugh that he

had heard so often. His words had brought her back to herself.

"I do not fear your threats," she said.

"I would not have you fear them."

"Why?"

"It would make my work harder to perform."

"Your work?"

"Yes."

"What work?"

"Zel, I am going to take you at your word."

"What do you mean?"

"I am going to torture you. I am going to forget that I am a man and become your equal, a fiend. I am going to pull your hairs out one by one until you are bald. Then I will heat the blade of my knife in the gas flame and brand the word 'fiend' upon your forehead, upon each cheek."

She tried to laugh, but failed.

"Then," he continued, "I will again heat my knife blade, and, with it, I will destroy the sight in your beautiful eyes. I will search you, to see that you have no poisons with which to take your own life, and then, branded, bald, blind, and helpless, I will turn you into the street, until you meet your death in some natural way. Do you like the prospect, Zel?"

"And you—you will do this?" she cried.

"Yes, I will do this."

"You! Nick Carter!"

"You forget, Zel. Nick Carter is dead, and a fiend is born in his place—a fiend who will torture you until you faint from agony, and will then revive you for further torture."

"Fool!" she cried. "Do you think that I will live to let you torture me thus?"

"You cannot die. If you so much as lift one hand to take a poison, if you move, in any way, seeking to avoid me, I will put a bullet through your hand, or shoot the vial from your fingers."

She laughed scornfully.

"You do not think that I could do it, perhaps," he said. "I will prove my words, Zel."

"Prove them?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"You wear eardrops, and each one is a bulb. Each bulb contains a poison, no doubt. I will deprive you of them. Thus!"

Both arms straightened out.

Two reports followed each other in rapid succession, and the bulbs were shot away from Zel's ears as accurately as though picked off with fingers.

Nick's hands sank again to his sides, and no weapons were visible.

Zel started back with a cry of terror. But she was unhurt, and she quickly recovered.

She started to raise her hands, but Nick spoke again.

"Do not lift your hands," he said coldly, "or I will pierce them with bullets. This is a tragedy, Zel, not a farce."

The two shots were the signals agreed upon with Chick. The detective knew that in another moment Chick would be there. He hoped that he would come silently, and he did.

The door by which they had entered from the adjoining room was ajar.

Chick, who had gained admittance to the house, and who had heard much that had been said, was close at hand.

A moment after the reports had died away, he appeared in the open doorway.

"You said once that you would haunt me, Zel," said Nick. "If I were dead, I would haunt you now. I would steal upon you from behind with the stealthiness of a specter, and I would seize your arms and hold them motionless. Do you understand?"

"No."

"Do you now?"

As he uttered the last words, Chick seized her.

She struggled and screamed, but in the powerful grasp of Chick she could not move.

"Zel," said Nick, "for once you are powerless. For once you are where you cannot escape, and you do not know what holds you. I shall put bracelets upon your wrists and upon your ankles, and then we will proceed with the torture."

She was quickly handcuffed, as he said, and then Nick seated her in a chair and fastened her there.

Then she saw Chick.

"Fool that I was!" she exclaimed. "I might have known."

"Yes, Zel, you might have known that you could drive even Nick Carter too far," said Chick. "Your servant who was to watch the house while you were here, is in the hall downstairs, but he is bound and gagged, so you need not worry about him. You are at our mercy, Zel."

"Yes, Zel," said Nick, "you are at the mercy of the man you love."

"Do you not wish to make terms, Nick Carter?"

"Terms! No. Why should I?"

"Would you save Ethel?"

"If I could, yes."

"Then why do you not seek to do so?"

"How?"

"By making terms with me."

"You have already said that you would not save her."

"I was not then in your power."

"To be sure. I forgot that. Will you give her the potion that will restore her?"

"I may."

"Will you?"

"If you will permit me to go, and will give me forty-eight hours in which to escape, yes."

"Ah, you are not so brave as you would have made me think!"

"No."

"This is your own proposal, is it not?"

"Yes."

"I refuse."

"Refuse!"

"Yes."

"You decline to save your wife?"

"I do not believe that she can be saved. I believe her to be dead and beyond even your hellish power. We will proceed with the torture. Take down Zel's hair, Chick."

"Mercy!" cried Zel.

"Why mercy?" asked Nick.

"I can save Ethel, and I will."

"Save her, then."

"If you will let me, I will."

"I will give you an opportunity."

"Will you consent to my terms?"

"I will consent to nothing."

"Then I will not lift a hand to save her. She shall perish."

Nick saw that he was driving her too far. His whole scheme was to frighten Zel into submission.

"I will leave your fate in her hands," said Nick.

"In Ethel's?"

"Yes."

"And you will abide by what she says?"

"Yes."

"I will risk it. I will save her—now."

"Very well, do so."

"Release me?"

"No."

"How then can I save her?"

"You will tell me how to do it and I will act, not you. If you fail, the torture will proceed."

"If I succeed, you will release me?"

"If Ethel says so; yes."

"I carried a hand bag when we came here?"

"Yes."

"It is in the other room. Get it."

It was brought to her.

"Open it and find the vial which is numbered 'seventeen,'" she said. "Then pour five drops between Ethel's lips."

"Which is the number that you gave her before—to which 'seventeen' is an antidote?" asked Nick.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I wish to know."

"It is number 'seven.'"

"Good! If you fail in this attempt upon Ethel, we will try number 'seven' on you after we have become tired of administering torture."

"You will not fail."

"I will make the attempt, anyway."

He lifted Ethel's head tenderly. Never had the detective suffered such agony as at that moment, but his face showed no sign of the anguish in his heart.

Tenderly he forced her lips apart and then her teeth, until there was just room enough between them through which to drop the ruby-colored liquid.

"One, two, three, four, five," he counted, and then he laid her head back again upon the pillow.

With eager eyes he watched her.

Moment after moment passed and not a sound disturbed the silence of the room.

Then, when five minutes had lapsed, Ethel suddenly opened her eyes in amazement.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TABLES TURNED.

When Ethel opened her eyes, the sight that met her gaze was astonishing in the extreme.

Upon entering the coupé in front of her own door, she had been chloroformed, and before coming out of the influence of that drug, the potent decoction which had made her seem so much like a corpse had been administered.

Now she was in a strange room. Before her stood Nick in his Old Thunderbolt disguise; beside him, Chick, looking like a young Frenchman out for a holiday, and beyond, tightly manacled and sitting in a chair in which she had been bound, was a woman whom she instantly recognized as Zel.

"How do you feel, Ethel?" asked Nick anxiously.

"Perfectly well."

"Can you get up?"

"Certainly," and she did so.

"You feel strong, and able to walk?"

"Yes—miles."

Then, in a few words, and as concisely as possible, Nick related to her all that had occurred, omitting only the strange proposition that Zel had made, for which the woman fiend threw him a grateful glance.

Hardened in crime as she was, the instincts of a woman were left, and she could not bear to have the fragment of a heart that she still possessed laid bare to the one who held the love she coveted.

"Now, Ethel," Nick continued, when he had finished, "Zel's fate remains with you. I have made her no promise, except that I will abide by your decision, whatever it may be. That she has saved you from death, I cannot deny, but she is also the one who put the danger upon you. I will leave you alone with her now, that my presence may not affect your decision in any way, and I have only one direction to give."

"What is that, Nick?"

"You are not to touch Zel, or to go nearer to her than you are now, under any circumstances. Let there be no mistake in this."

With Chick, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

"You will call me, Ethel, when you are ready for me," he said, just before he shut the door.

She assented, and the two women were left alone together.

Then the detective and his assistant waited. Fifteen minutes passed, and still they were not summoned. Still Nick was in no haste to enter. Ten minutes more, and yet they were not called in.

Only a thin partition separated the two rooms, and they had heard no sound.

"I will wait five minutes longer and no more," said Nick.

Then he studied his watch while the five minutes slowly ticked themselves away.

Suddenly he threw open the door.

Then he uttered a loud exclamation of astonishment.

The room in which he had left Zel manacled to her chair, and where Ethel had been, free, and in her right senses, was empty.

Ethel and Zel were gone.

He rubbed his eyes in perplexity. He bounded to the chair where Zel had been fastened.

The cords that had bound her there were lying upon the floor, having been cut by a sharp instrument.

The manacles were there also, and he saw that they had been opened with a key.

Upon the seat of the chair was a hastily written note.

"Fooled again," it said. "The tables are turned, Nick Carter. I am again free, and Ethel is yet in my power. Find her if you can. Z."

"Gone!" exclaimed Nick.

"Gone!" echoed Chick.

"But how?" continued Nick. "Ethel was free, and Zel was bound. Chick, has that fellow whom you bound and gagged and left in the lower hall, escaped?"

One leap carried Chick to the door, which led into the hall.

He opened it, and was about to dash out, when he was met by a blinding flash.

A loud report followed, and Chick staggered back into the room, and whirling, fell senseless at the feet of Nick Carter.

It was a moment to act, not to think.

Nick's arm straightened out and a ball went flying toward the spot from which the flash had come. It was one of his wonderful snapshots, and he had only the flash of the enemy's weapon at which to fire.

Nevertheless he hit the mark. A loud groan and a heavy fall followed the report of his weapon.

With a bound the detective cleared the prostrate form of Chick. With another he reached the hallway, and while moving he drew his bull's-eye lantern and pressed the spring.

Upon the floor in front of him was stretched the body of a man. Nick seized him and dragged him back into the room that he had just left. A glance told him that the man was not dead. He left him, then, and hurried to Chick.

Blood was flowing from the faithful assistant's sleeve, and the detective tore away his coat. In a moment he found the wound.

Chick had been shot in the shoulder, and the shock, rather than the wound itself, had overcome him.

It was an ugly wound, but one from which he would recover. Nick stanched the flow of blood, and dressed the wound as best he could under the circumstances.

Then he turned his attention to the fellow whom he had shot. The man was already beginning to revive, and presently he opened his eyes.

Patiently the detective waited until the fellow had regained strength enough to talk.

"Now, my man," he said, "unless you want to suffer the tortures of the inquisition, talk. I am in a torturing mood to-night, and I would just as soon cut out your tongue, as I would the tongue of a serpent. If you don't use it, you will lose it. Talk."

"What d'ye want me to say?"

"How did Zel get out of that chair?"

"I freed her."

"Why did not the lady who was with her give the alarm?"

"I chloroformed her."

"How?"

"Stole on her from behind."

"And then——"

"Then I freed Zel."

"What next?"

"We carried your wife to the hack."

"What hack?"

"The one I had at the door, according to orders."

"From whom?"

"Zel."

"What was it for?"

"She said you were going away with her."

"Who drove the hack? One of your accomplices?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"My pal. When I got here, I went into the lower hall. I found my pal there, bound and gagged. I let him up. We knew there was trouble here. We came up on the dead quiet. We saw and heard what was taking place. When you went into the back room, we did the rest."

"Then you stayed behind."

"Yes."

"What for?"

"To kill you."

"Orders?"

"Yes."

"Where was the hack to go, from here?"

"To Brooklyn."

"Give me the address?"

"I don't know the number."

"Describe the place."

"It's on the boulevard."

"Near what?"

"Near Flatbush."

"Well?"

"A big house with the gables on the road, and poplar trees all around it."

"Ah! 'Walker Grange.'"

"That's it."

"The hack went there?"

"Yes."

"If you are lying to me, I swear to you that I will ——"

"I am not lying."

"Why do you betray Zel?"

"Because I didn't go into this thing for murder."

"What for, then?"

"Boodle."

"How long have you known Zel?"

"'Bout a week."

"And your pal?"

"The same."

"Is there anybody at 'Walker Grange' now?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"The nigger."

"The one who hit my friend to-day?"

"Yes."

"Anybody else?"

"No."

"Your pal, the nigger, and Zel will be the only ones there when I get there, if I go at once?"

"Yes."

"What is your pal's name?"

"Bill Murray."

"And the nigger's?"

"Ike."

"You brought the horses and hack here?"

"Yes."

"Where from?"

"Morton's stables, on One Hundred and Twenty-eighth Street."

"Were the horses fresh?"

"Not very."

"Are they good ones?"

"No, plugs; I had to buy 'em to get 'em, and I got cheap ones."

"You are sure about this?"

"Certain."

"You have been to 'Walker Grange' from here before?"

"Lots of times."

"With a fresh horse, and in the saddle, how much time could I give Bill Murray and beat him there?"

"Nearly an hour."

"Good! I know something that will beat a good saddle

horse. Now, how long had they been gone from the door when you fired at Chick?"

"They had just left."

"And you came back to kill me?"

"Yes."

"I thought you weren't in this for murder?"

"Zel told me if I'd do it, she'd marry me."

"When did she tell you that?"

"When she got into the carriage."

"Do you believe her?"

"No; I did then, though."

Chick had regained consciousness during the first part of the conversation, and now attempted to rise to his feet.

"Can you walk, Chick?" asked Nick.

"I guess so."

"I have found out where Zel has gone, and I will get there first. You stay here and I will send the first officer that I meet to your assistance. Can you stand it?"

"Yes."

"Keep this fellow for future developments."

Nick did not wait to say more. One leap carried him to the door, and the next one took him out. Then he started away like a race horse. On the corner of Bleecker, just at the elevated station, he met a policeman. A few hasty words sufficed to tell him all he cared to.

An elevated train southbound was just rolling in at the station. Nick went up the stairs two steps at a time. The train was starting away when he reached the platform.

The gateman sought to stop him, but Nick caught him by the throat and pushed him aside as though he were a straw. Then he passed through the gate and jumped for the train. He reached the rear platform of the last car. He seized the gate, leaped over it, and was safely aboard of a downtown train which would carry him to Park Place in a few minutes.

CHAPTER X.

A RIDE FOR LIFE.

When the train reached Park Place, Nick cleared the rear gate with a bound, and ran pell-mell down the stairs. At the foot of the stairs several cabs were standing waiting for belated travelers. Nick leaped from the pavement clear to the top of one of them, and seized the reins, much to the astonishment of the driver, who thought that he was attacked by a madman.

"I want to drive to Brooklyn across the bridge, unless I can just catch a train," said Nick, as he whipped up the horse. "I will give you ten dollars in either case, so sit still."

Cabby did sit still. Ten-dollar bills were not to be picked up so easily every night, and he was content.

Nick's proverbial luck was with him. As he approached the bridge, he saw that a train was just ready to start.

In a second, he pulled a bill from his pocket, leaped to the ground, and tore up the stairs of the bridge at a breakneck pace.

He caught the train just in time. The bell rang as he sprang aboard, and the train started the next second.

Six minutes later Nick was in Brooklyn. There, he left the train, and ran to the street with the same swiftness as before, causing everybody who saw him to turn and stare with wonder, thinking him either a madman, or one who was trying to escape arrest.

A policeman at the foot of the bridge stairs tried to stop him, but Nick was in no mood for trifling. His hand shot out, and the policeman went down as though he had been kicked by a mule.

Then the detective dashed up Washington Street to Stein's stables.

"A saddle horse, quick!" he said.

"What for?" asked the man in charge.

"A matter of life and death," replied Nick, throwing three one-hundred-dollar bills into the hands of the manager.

"There's a deposit. Give me a good one—a stayer—a goer—and be quick about it. I'll give you an extra ten when I return. I am Nick Carter!"

The announcement acted like magic. The man flew to obey. In an incredibly short space of time, a huge gray horse was saddled, and brought before the detective.

One glance satisfied him that the horse was a good one. He seized a whip, and bounded into the saddle.

The horse seemed to feel the necessity of the moment. The rider's tireless energy was, in a sense, imparted to the animal, and he dashed away over the pavement at a pace that would have been considered reckless in daylight.

Policemen endeavored to stop him in his mad career, but Nick rode straight at them, and they had to get out of the way to save themselves from being trampled upon.

Once, at the junction of Flatbush and Fulton Avenues, an officer drew his revolver and threatened to shoot if Nick did not stop.

Nick shouted "All right," and then rode at the officer. When near enough, he leaned down from his saddle. He caught the policeman's revolver in his grasp, and wrenched it from his hand. Then he dashed on again.

Fire flew from beneath the horse's hoofs. In and out, among cars, past coupés, over débris piled in the street, several times narrowly escaping running over some unwary pedestrian, he dashed, and at last the park was reached. Then he knew that he would meet with no further trouble.

His destination was "Walker Grange," and he was all the while keeping a sharp lookout on the carriage that he was determined to beat to its destination. He passed two, either of which might be the one. Could he have known positively he would have finished the trip then and there. But he did not, and he could not spare the time to investigate. The carriage he was seeking might still be ahead.

He believed that Ethel would be in no great peril before the house on the boulevard was reached. But everything depended upon his getting to the house before Zel. He was bound to do it.

Through the park he sped, and out upon the boulevard. Before him loomed the great house known as "Walker Grange," with its fringe of poplars, and its gloomy aspect.

He stopped his horse and leaped to the ground. Then he led the faithful animal, wet with foam, among the trees at the side of the boulevard and tied him.

"I am in time," he murmured. "They have not yet arrived. When they do come, I will show the woman Zel no mercy.

"It is not her life or mine; it is hers or Ethel's, and it shall be hers."

Then he crept toward the house, going carefully, for he suspected that the negro would be upon the watch. He

was. Nick saw him sitting upon the broad veranda, smoking his pipe, and evidently upon the lookout for the carriage which he no doubt expected.

Nick stole around the house, and then crept toward the corner near which the negro was sitting. Suddenly, he barked like a dog almost at the negro's feet.

The black leaped up with a curse, and the next instant he received a blow from Nick's fist, which sent him reeling from the veranda to the grass. Nick followed up the blow by leaping upon him.

Another violent right-hander left the negro limp and unconscious in the detective's hand.

To bind and gag him thoroughly was the work of a moment.

Then the detective picked him up in his arms as though he were a child, and carried him into the house.

His idea was to make up to represent the negro, but he did not have time.

Almost as soon as he had carried the fellow into the house, he heard the roll of wheels, and he knew that the hack which had Ethel for a passenger was approaching.

To open the cellar door and push the negro down, was the work of an instant. Then he went through the house to the front, and waited, standing where he could see everything that happened.

He saw the hack stop, and Bill Murray leap down.

"Ike! Ike!" he heard him call; but Ike did not answer.

"Curse the nigger! Where is he?"

"Drunk, maybe," replied Zel's voice. "Here, Bill, carry my sister into the house."

"Her sister!" muttered Nick, with a shudder.

"Is she dead?" asked Bill.

"Dead! No;" and Zel laughed. "She is not dead yet. Take her in."

"Where to?"

"The parlor."

That was the room in which Nick was waiting, and he stood behind the door when it opened, waiting for a chance at Bill, for he saw that Zel was waiting by the horses until he returned.

The chance came. There was no light in the room, except that which the moon gave, but Bill knew where the sofa was. Indeed, he could see it in the moonlight. He went toward it with his burden; he placed Ethel upon it, and then—well, then he saw starlight.

Something struck him. It was Nick's fist, and Bill fell like a bullock smitten with an ax. He did not utter a sound, but fell senseless at the first blow. Nick quickly handcuffed him, and then he turned to Ethel.

A glance, even in that light, told him that she was suffering from nothing more serious than chloroform.

"Poor child!" he murmured. "You shall be persecuted no more, I swear!"

"Bill!" cried the voice of Zel.

"Well, what d'ye want?" shouted Nick, imitating Bill's voice.

"Come here to these horses."

"Cuss the horses! Let 'em go. I'm stuck on this gal, I am. Say, you ain't a-goin' to do her up while I'm in it, you hear me!"

He heard Zel laugh, and it was a laugh that portended evil.

Then he saw her leave the horses and come toward the house. Something glistened in her hand, and the moonlight betrayed the fact that it was a revolver.

"She believed that I would kill Bill's pal, and now she means to murder Bill," thought Nick. "Later, she would do for Ike. Ah, what a fiend she is!"

She entered the house, and came to the door which led from the hall into the room where Nick was. There she paused.

"Bill!" she said softly.

Then Nick touched the spring in his bull's-eye lantern, and the sudden ray of brilliant light fell full upon her face, blinding her.

"Bill is not here," he said sharply. "It is I who wait for you, Zel."

"Nick Carter!"

"Yes. Move, and I will shoot you where you stand."

"Bah! shoot me, then. I do not fear that. I made a devil of you, and you would torture me. If I could see you past that blinding ray of light that you hold in my eyes, I would try to shoot you, Nick Carter. If I could run, and hope to escape, I would do so. If I could take poison, believing that you would not have a post-mortem held over me to insure my death, I would do so.

"But I can do none of them. You have foiled me at every turn, and so now I do this."

There was a loud report, and Zel, the female fiend, fell forward upon the floor at Nick Carter's feet, dead.

She had turned the revolver without raising her hand, and the ball had pierced her heart.

Nick could not prevent the act, for he could not see it until it was done.

Dead at last, surely dead!

There would be no resurrection this time for Zel.

Nick Carter's greatest enemy was defeated—and dead!

THE END.

That the mysterious criminal arts practiced by Doctor Quartz and his notorious pupil, Zelma, did not disappear with these two persons is shown in the story which will be published in the next issue of this weekly—No. 78—to be out on January 20th. The story is entitled "The Heir of Doctor Quartz; or, Nick Carter's Game of Plots." Opening with the murder of a beautiful young countess, it describes the adventures of Nick Carter in the course of his investigation of one of the most extraordinary crimes that ever was reported to the New York police. At almost every turn the famous detective finds himself confronted by a master criminal mind—by one whose methods are so plainly those of Doctor Quartz that Nick Carter sometimes feels inclined to suspect that his mysterious enemy is none other than the physician whom he believes to be dead. What that person is the reader must learn for himself in the course of a narrative that will grip his interest in the first chapter and will hold him spellbound to the end.

FINE WRITING.

For some time there has been shown in San Francisco a piece of paper thirteen by seven and a half inches, on which there are written one hundred and twenty-six thousand words. This writing is in the work of Kobo Taishi, a Buddhist, of Japan, who lived eleven hundred years ago. Before his time his countrymen used only Chinese characters in writing, and he evolved the idea of the Japanese alphabet.

The writing on the paper is so fine that a microscope has to be used to decipher the intricate Japanese characters. It is an exact copy of eight books of the Buddhist

Bible, and was written by the author as a sort of penance to purify his spirit. It is the property of a descendant of the writer, and has passed as a sacred heirloom from father to son for a thousand years. Every precaution has been taken to insure the safety of the document.

Contraband of War.

By EDWIN FOWLER.

(A Two-part Story—Part I.)

CHAPTER I.

AN EMERGENCY CREW.

The *Mandalay* was in much trouble. She was a tramp steamer carrying passengers when any offered themselves, which was an impeccable line of industry from a marine point of view; but just now she was bound from San Francisco to Nagasaki with an assorted cargo of contraband goods consigned to various Japanese houses, which were deplorably in peril from watchful Russian cruisers. Steel rails and parts of locomotives and submarines, invoiced as sewing machines; nitrates and sulphur masquerading as seeds, and stout woolen and cotton cloth claimed to be bales of silk, would naturally look worse than fishy in the eyes of a critical prize court—to say nothing of barreled flour, beef, and pickled pork, concerning which a plausible fight might be made.

Consequently, Captain Petty's genial face was gloomy and corrugated. He imbibed his Santa Cruz and water with a depreciatory gulp, as if it were fok's'l blackstrap, grunted irritably over his morning bacon and eggs, and stormed in un-Hellenic language at the ship's "doctor," who prepared it, until that colored citizen regretted his ancestral whitewash pail. Mate Kramer, less burdened with responsibility, but humorously alive to the situation, kept a man in the cro' nest night and day sweeping the horizon with powerful glasses.

The crew were dock rats picked up with infinite trouble on the Frisco wharves, for the owners were close-fisted and wages low; moreover, rumors of Russian severities were rife in the dance houses, and wary mariners shook their heads doubtfully over the certain risks they would run in case of capture. They were a surly and incompetent gang, although handspikes on deck and spanners in the engine room scientifically administered, appealed to their better feelings sufficiently to keep them out of the spirits room of the *Mandalay* heading Japanward.

Two mutinous rascals had been left in irons at Honolulu and another at Guam, but as the steamer drew nearer to the seat of war visions of bloodthirsty Muscovite destroyers, and rumors of the Siberian salt mines loomed large in their below-watch deliberations. At Hongkong they deserted in a body, and were hopelessly lost among the heterogeneous scum of all nations which infest that port and its purlieus, aided doubtless by amphibian John Chinamen, always thriftily on the lookout to befriend oppressed mariners—for a consideration.

The diction of captain and chief mate grew hourly more picturesque and noncommercial. They were within fifteen days' steam of their port, harbor charges were mounting up, they were in command of a ship filled to the hatches with disguised contraband of war—the character of which spies were probably learning from the scattered deserters—telegrams from the consignees were pouring in—inquiring, imploring, and denunciatory—and they saw small chance of entrapping another company for such hazardous service. They would gladly have manned with the sweepings of the jails, if furnished with the necessary complement of legs and hands.

At this desperate pass appeared a local native crimp, offering, at exorbitant figures, to put on board a company of Swedes and Finns lately come ashore from a wreck twenty miles to the eastward; and Captain Petty nailed the bargain before the fellow had swallowed his second cup of samshu. The mate's gorge rose within him as they shambled on board—unshaven, squalid, hideously foul in person, and in rags that inadequately covered their nakedness—for he was a cleanly Vermont man, and prided himself on his neat decks. Only two spoke English, but this, to his eyes, in no wise excused their repulsive ineptitude in understanding orders and their lubberly clumsiness in executing them.

"Get forward, ye mangy swabs," he intimated, in deep disgust. "Pry the top dressing of that filth from yer carcasses, and then lemme see if I can't learn ye the differ betwixt a pig trough and a bower anchor."

When they reappeared there was a manifest improvement in their personnel, and a commendable attempt had been made to calk up their tatters with pins and string. The mate eyed them less ferociously. Despite their hobolike toilets, there was a promptitude and spring in their movements which contrasted cheerfully with the hangdog sullenness of the gallant mariners who had resigned office in their favor.

"Ye're a heartbreaking bilin' of scavengers," he assured them, in mollified tones, "and I'll lam the lives out of ye if ye don't stand by and keep yer weather eyes liftin'. But I s'pose it's only for fifteen days, and needs must when the devil drives."

Their interpreter, a huge man with a red beard, sparsely clad in a scarecrow combination of ragged civil and naval "hand-me-downs," nevertheless had a smart military respectfulness of manner, and spoke intelligible broken English. Evidently he had his Pretorians well in hand, and signed papers with them for Nagasaki, humbly hoping for the privilege of navigating the *Mandalay* to Cape Town, her next port of destination.

As they were about to weigh anchor, a party of Americans, making a tour of the world, applied for passage. The captain objected strenuously, pointing out the danger of capture. Mr. Oliver and his wife—a pretty, vivacious brunette, who chaperoned the expedition—pooh-poohed his fears, assured him that the Japanese cruisers had made the trip as safe as from New York to Boston, and finally produced a written order from the local agent that he should accommodate them. Grumbling, he obeyed, disclaiming with enviable scriptural fluency all responsibility for their safety. The staterooms were made ready, and as soon as the party, consisting of three ladies with their maids, the husband, and a friend, were on board with their baggage, the *Mandalay* hauled out into the stream.

The officers consisted of the master, Captain—by courtesy—Jabez Petty; his first mate, Kramer; second, Armstrong; and engineer, McNeill. The passengers included Mr. and Mrs. Oliver, Miss Mildred Incely, sister of the latter; Miss May Compton, all of Philadelphia, and Mr. Grant Taylor, clubman, yachtsman, militiaman, and member of the New York Athletic Club. He had carried with

him on his trip his cruising canoe, *Viking*, in which he delighted to explore safe waterways on their leisurely lounge through the East, and in which Miss Compton was more than frequently his fellow *voyageuse*. The young couple were ecstatically fond of each other, and therefore bickered like a pair of Australian parrakeets.

The unmarried ladies were typical Eastern society belles, frankly coquettish, full of animation and charm, who quarreled prettily over the divided homage of the unattached young man. They ordered him about, compelled him to take sides, then combined against and snubbed him cordially, to his deep delight—after the manner of American princesses dealing with the masculine slaves appointed unto their service by the gods. The two maids, Norah and Adèle, were healthy, good-natured daughters of effete Europe—pretty withal—at whose supercilious inferior shrines—for it is bewildering how deftly Irish and French *femmes de chambre* catch the atmosphere—Armstrong sighed impartially, while McNeill, when off duty, caroled in gruff bass idyllic mendacities touching "a life on the ocean wa-a-ve," coupled with unblushing assurances that "a sailor's wife a sailor's star-ar shall be-e-e," the same being guileful, with intent to mislead as to the frozen truth.

The tall Swede, who called himself Jan Jensen, was borne on the log as boatswain, and his fourteen sinister tatterdemalions, with "Mr. Johnsing," the colored cook, and Bowling—popularly known as Bowlegs—the cabin boy, completed the little handful of souls who cast off the tug and steamed out of Hongkong roads on August the eight, nineteen hundred and four.

At first all went well. The weather was fine. No Russian flag was hoisted on the ships they met or overhauled; accordingly, no round shot hurtled across their bows with menacing orders to "heave to." In the captain's bosom, faith in the justice of Providence began to germinate, even as a grain of mustard seed. Wherefore his jolly red face untwisted and almost smiled; he began to pay ponderous compliments to the ladies, and even relaxed into chaff with Mr. Taylor and made sly suggestions as to "how happy would he be with either, were the other," et cetera, et cetera.

Off the north coast of Formosa a Japanese cruiser hove alongside and sent a boat. A little brown lieutenant swung himself aboard—irreproachable from smart service cap to canvas shoes—and greeted the captain cordially, informing him of the latest war news. The Russian fleet at Port Arthur had been defeated in a sortie and forced back to inevitable capture, the remnant of the Vladivostok squadron was in flight, and the United States, Great Britain, and Germany had taken vigorous measures to limit the pernicious activity of Muscovite converted cruisers, preying on neutral commerce. He warned them against being picked up by the *Lena*, the *Amoor*, and others, known to have escaped. All this in slightly slangy American—for he had been an Annapolis cadet. Running his eye doubtfully over the slovenly crew, who looked a little more stolid and unsailorly than usual, he advised the master to be watchful of them, and even offered to leave some of his own men, a tender which was declined with much subsequent regret. Then, with a low inclination and an oblique-eyed glance of admiration at the fair beauty of the three ladies, he went smartly over the side, and the friendly ship was soon lost on the horizon.

All this revived the discomfort of the captain.

"Mr. Kramer," he said to his chief aid, "I don't feel more than half easy in my mind about the men. How do they strike you?"

"They seem a civil, obedient lot, sir," he replied. "Most of them know as little about sailorman's duty as a bull does about drying copra, but they learn quickly, and I guess we can worry through with them to Nagasaki."

"That's just the trouble," growled Captain Petty discontentedly. "They're too damned willing and respectful. No grumbling about grub, no black looks when you cuss 'em. Nothin' but a horse-marine salute and jabbering among themselves in what Jensen calls Swedish. Sounds to me a sight more like moujik talk, as I remember it in Odessa."

"They're sure an outlandish set of seamen, I allow, sir. But, Lord, what can you expect from job-lot mongrels picked out of the slums and signed for a fortnight's run through the islands in a black sheep like the *Mandalay*."

"Well, Mr. Kramer, sir, keep your eyes peeled. Watch them for arms, and keep your guns in your breeches pockets out of their reach. See they don't get to the spirits, and water their tot of grog a trifle."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"And serve out barkers to the other officers. They're an ugly gang, for all their bowing and saluting, and they talk together too much. Keep their noses to the grindstone, Mr. Kramer."

"Certainly, sir. I'll do that."

"I've noticed some of 'em casting sheeps' eyes at the women and prying about in the hold. Keep 'em busy scraping the chain cable, chewing oakum—anything. This is too silk-fine to last."

"The cargo is gettin' on the old man's nerves," grinned the first mate to Armstrong, as he communicated the chief's orders to him and the engineer. "Never fear. I'll bullyrag their immortal souls out of 'em if they try any hanky-panky business."

Petty cautiously hinted his suspicions to the two gentlemen, and met more credence, for possibly the men had been less guarded in their presence. Mr. Oliver had traveled much in Europe, and was pretty sure he had caught Russian expressions as they passed; he fancied he had had a glimpse of a hastily concealed ikon. Taylor had gone on a cruise in a revenue cutter in Bering Sea, and they reminded him of the hunters and harpooners—half-seal fishers, half outlaws—who were always watching to evade the strong arm of the law in the vicinity of the Prybyloff Islands. Norah had slapped the face of one who attempted to kiss her, and he had half drawn a great knife. Miss Incely had been annoyed by the leering admiration in the eyes of another.

So a black cloud of fear and distrust hung over the midships and stern of the *Mandalay*, much intensified by the presence of the ladies and their maids.

CHAPTER II.

AN ISLAND INCIDENT.

One night a curious accident happened. Although apparently securely stowed, the casks had broken loose, stayed each other, and the supply of drinking water, except that in the scuttle butt on deck, was washing about in the bilge. Of course this might have been brought about by the heave and send of the sea and lubberly lashing, but such a thing was unusual in moderate weather. It was clearly necessary to go ashore and refill, after tinkering up the crushed staves. This was easy enough

—except for the delay—as they were threading the archipelago of islands north of Formosa, and the captain decided to water next morning. When dawn broke the *Mandalay* was anchored four miles off a small wooded island, marked "uninhabited" on the chart, on whose steep sides a small waterfall was visible like a silver thread. Shallows and outlying reefs made nearer approach dangerous.

The captain pondered deeply.

"If they mean mischief, now is their chance," he explained to his officers and the two gentlemen. "I am not willing to trust Jensen alone with them on shore in the boat, and yet all of us are not too many to hold them in check if they are up to deviltry. On the other hand, I am not safe in leaving any of them on board with the women. It's the case of the fox, the goose, and the bag of corn."

"What's the matter with all of us men going ashore together in the longboat?" suggested Armstrong. "Johnson and Bowling can stay with the ladies, for they are no good in a scrimmage."

"Good scheme, Mr. Armstrong. That's what I've been thinking. We can put it on the ground of wishing to hunt and explore while the crew are at work. So take your firearms, and, Mr. Taylor, sir, we might tow your cockleshell astern to give color to the idea. It won't do to awaken their suspicions, for I can't work the steamer to Nagasaki without them. That will keep the fellows under our thumbs, as it were, and the ladies will be quite safe in our absence."

The mate glanced sharply at Jensen's face as he gave the necessary orders. To his relief, no shadow of disappointment showed itself; his broad face beamed like that of a good-natured ogre, and the men sprang cheerily to the work of lowering the boat and casks. The ladies protested that they must and would go also, but were satisfied, if not silenced, by hints of supposititious savages and assurances that the boat could not contain them all.

They pushed off, the Americans in the stern well armed, and the crew, to all appearances, having no lethal weapons but their sheath knives. They pulled fairly in unison, to the time of a folk song led by Jensen. The ladies in light, summer costumes, waved their handkerchiefs, with many admonitions touching beach conches, flowers, and flamingo wings. The azure sea heaved gently, the sky was cloudless, the distant islet rose like a gem, palms tufted its heights, and the whole scene was as peaceful and Arcadian as a picnic in the north woods.

They beached on white coral sand, up which the little foam-tipped ripples broke musically. The men heaved out the barrels.

"Jensen," ordered the captain, "roll them up to the water, till, and be smart about it. There may be savages lurking about; one can never tell. If attacked, run this way, and yell. We will stand them off with our rifles and revolvers."

"Leetle father," grinned Jensen genially, "we weel do your bidding diligently and swiftly."

The men broke away through the bushes, trundling the casks before them, whooping and laughing like schoolboys on a lark. Kramer slapped his knee approvingly. This looked well.

"Mr. Taylor," said the captain, "I have the idea that by going round that point you can get a clear view with your glasses of the foot of the waterfall. Suppose you sail round there in your gimcrack and lie off and on as if looking for sea birds; we will stay here together."

"Certainly, captain, the gimcrack and its master are at your orders."

"Thankee, sir. Keep your eye on them, and three shots in succession from either of us will mean danger."

Taylor dropped the Radix centerboard of the *Viking*, and hoisted her two batwing sails. They were of a brilliant red, embroidered in gold, with truculent dragons. This was a whim of his, which he defended by many distinct and convincing reasons, besides the real one—that they looked startlingly bizarre and picturesque. In fifteen minutes the little vessel, glittering with varnish and jeweled with flashing nickel fittings, was gliding around the point with the freshening breeze like a huge butterfly.

McNeill gazed depreciatingly, and retired from active duty an ancient and shopworn quid.

"Armstrong, what should you judge such craft as that are worth?"

"Ten thinking, just about thirty cents a dozen—for your best girl to stick in her hair Sundays," responded that deep-sea mariner, in strong professional disgust.

The party carefully scrutinized their weapons, and waited.

In about an hour a crashing in the bushes announced the advent of the watering party. They put two full barrels on the boat and awaited their boatswain's further orders. Nothing could be more cheerful and workmanlike than their demeanor.

"Two parrels more, leetle father," announced Jensen, with his eternal salute. "I left dree vellers at der vater guarding it from vild mans. Back in der half hour."

"As innocent a gang of ignorant roustabouts as ever I manhandled," remarked Kramer judicially. "We're in luck to get 'em. I don't believe that big chap would hurt the feelings of an orphan mosquito."

There was another wait.

Suddenly the quiet was torn by an uproar of shouts and yells from the interior.

"Vild mans, vild mans!" bellowed Jensen. "Hasten, leetle father! Dey keel us and we haf no arms!"

On the run, the six men tore through the thick tropical vegetation, vines, and tough shrubs impeding them. They expected at every step to meet bleeding fugitives pursued by savages, striking and hewing, but none appeared.

"They are surrounded," shouted Captain Petty. "Come on, boys, for your lives!"

In ten minutes they had reached the foot of the cataract. It was a pretty, limpid pool surrounded by moist, green ferns and bamboos; the herbage was trampled, the shrubs torn. Two full barrels stood waiting. Screams and curses to the left indicated that the men were fleeing inland—no doubt intercepted by their assailants. They rushed that way. Not a sailor, not a savage! But a horrid death shriek sounded from the dense thickets a hundred yards deeper in the inextricable tangle of the jungle.

"Help, master, help!" Jensen was shouting, in an apparent ecstasy of pain and terror, his yell ending in a horrible quavering gurgle.

They struggled on desperately, stumbling over fallen trunks, plunging through quagmires, looking for quivering corpses and fearing to find them. An ominous silence had succeeded the heart-rending clamor. They saw nothing but the track of a party tearing through the bushes

in the direction of the shore—heard nothing but the derisive chatter of the parrots overhead. Three shots rang out faintly from the right.

"That's Mr. Taylor's rifle," shouted the captain, in a flash of illumination. "By goats! I believe we are being fooled. Back to the boat, back to the boat, for God's sake, before we are too late!"

A roar of Homeric laughter came from the beach.

When they reached the spot where they had landed—exhausted, bleeding, bathed in mire and perspiration—they beheld the longboat, filled with their traitorous crew, already two hundred yards from shore, pulling strongly for the ship. A Russian boat flag fluttered defiantly from the stern.

"There are your innocent roustabouts, Kramer. Blast their pictures!" panted Armstrong, in bitter irony.

At an order from the captain that they return, Jensen, who was steering, placed the sharp of his hand behind his ear, raised his cap, and kissed his hand derisively to the bewildered shore party—now pale, and cursing with mortification and a terror that chilled every heart.

"Fire on them!" ordered Petty.

TO BE CONCLUDED.

THE RUBY HILT.

By CHARLES W. MILLER.

For the better part of an hour the man sat in one corner of the café and watched me. I pretended to ignore him, but there was something in the quiet, stealthy manner in which he kept his eyes upon my every movement that finally sent me straight to his table.

"Now, what is it?" I demanded abruptly.

His lean, sallow face betrayed no emotion. He seemed to regard my question as a matter of course.

"Will you be seated?" he asked, waving a slim hand toward the chair opposite him.

I hesitated. It was some time before the noon hour, and the café was deserted save for we two and the aproned waiter who stood carelessly polishing a glass near the modest little bar.

I had dropped in for a flagon of the wine for which the place is famous. The café, with its clean, sanded floor and quaint old furnishings, appeared attractive, and I had lingered longer than had been my intention.

It was while I sat sipping the wine and watching the procession of odd bullock-drawn sleds in the rocky street that I had noticed the peculiar actions of the other customer. From the moment of my entrance he had given me his undivided attention. At first I thought it merely the natural curiosity of a stranger, but as the time passed and he still kept his gaze bent upon me, I became restive, then angry.

Impulsiveness is an undesirable part of my character, and it was an impulse that sent me to him with a peremptory demand. It was also an impulse that caused me to take the seat he had indicated.

As we sat on opposite sides of the little table I saw that he was not a Spaniard or Portugese as I had first supposed. His face was more English in its appearance, and when he next spoke I thought I could trace a slight cockney accent.

"Now, what is it?" I asked for the second time. "You have been watching me since I entered this café. I do not know you, and I think I can safely say that you do not know me."

The man nodded gravely.

"We have never met before," he replied.

"Then what——"

"But I know all about you," he interrupted.

"The dev——"

"Your name is Roger B. Hamilton. The B in your name stands for Bainbridge. You are an American, aged twenty-seven, live in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and you are now returning home after an extended tour of the Continent."

He ended with a slight smile and deftly rolled a cigarette. I could only stare at him in amazement.

"You are a Harvard graduate, and the scar you carry on your left shoulder blade is the result of a bad tumble from a horizontal bar. You speak German, French, and Spanish with some fluency, and your Uncle Howard gave you a check for twenty-five thousand dollars on your last birthday. No, Mr. Hamilton, we've never met, but I happen to know something of your history."

I watched him strike a match and light his cigarette before trusting myself to speak. The cool assurance of the fellow, and the marvelous knowledge he had of me, gave my temper a severe strain. Who was he, and what did it all mean?

"Perhaps you are Sherlock Holmes in disguise?" I finally exclaimed, trying sarcasm as a cloak to my confusion.

"Never met him, sir, but I've heard of the chap. Great detective, wasn't he? Did a lot of clever stunts in deduction. For instance, if he were here he probably would say that your left foot was injured a year ago, but that you never wore crutches."

I gasped again. It was true, every word of it. But how in the name of all that is wonderful did this amazing stranger know it?

"Sherlock Holmes would say that," continued the man, "and he would give as a reason for his belief, the fact that your right hand is calloused on the palm from leaning heavily upon a stick. But," he sent a wreath of smoke airily toward the low ceiling, "he would not know that you had received the injury jumping from a moving Broadway car near the corner of Twenty-seventh Street."

I leaned across the table and caught the speaker by the arm.

"This thing has gone far enough," I said firmly. "Who are you and where did you learn all this? Speak, or——"

My grasp was strong, but the fellow threw off my hand as easily as if it had been a mere touch. His smile faded, and he replied gravely:

"Yes, Mr. Hamilton, it has gone far enough. I don't blame you for feeling angry. My information was obtained in a perfectly legitimate manner. I cannot tell you how, at least just at present. However, perhaps this will give you an idea."

He opened the top buttons of his waistcoat and revealed a small silver badge. It bore in raised letters the following: "International Detective Association. 32—K—18—BB."

"That is my profession," continued my *vis-à-vis* quietly. "I am here on a case, and I am going to ask you to help me."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I do not think you will object. You have been here a fortnight and have seen all the sights. I can prom-

se you an interesting experience and possibly an exciting adventure. I will be perfectly frank with you. I need a man with some nerve, and also one who can handle a revolver if need be. Before I go any further, however, permit me to introduce myself. My name is Thornton Lodd."

He bowed courteously, and I found myself following his example. The man certainly interested me, and I must confess that my curiosity to see the end of this most remarkable experience became stronger with each passing moment. I signed to him to proceed.

Dodd ordered the waiter to fetch two flagons of wine, and lighted another cigarette after passing his package to me.

"Exactly four weeks ago my chief in New York sent for me. 'Thornton,' he said, 'on the third of last month, Sir John Barberry, of London, while stopping at Lisbon on his way to this country in his yacht, had the misfortune to lose by theft a unique and valuable heirloom. It was stolen from his person in the hotel, and all effort to recover the object has failed. Sir John does us the honor to believe that we can recover it. Here is a typewritten statement covering the entire case. A steamer leaves tomorrow at ten o'clock. It is now five in the afternoon. Draw sufficient money to cover your expenses and go. And remember, do not come back without the missing article.'

"I left on the steamer and arrived here several days ago. I have located the heirloom, and I have no doubt that I can recover it, but I need the assistance of one man. Now, Mr. Hamilton, I want you to be that man."

"What was the article?" I asked.

"The hilt of a broken sword. The head of the hilt consists of an enormous ruby. Its value is undoubted. The reward is one thousand pounds. If you will help me I'll promise you half of my share, and——"

"I don't want any of your money," I interrupted, "and I don't know that I care to be mixed up in any criminal case. Who are you, anyway?"

The last sentence was blurted out as a final concession to my dignity. Dodd merely smiled.

"I'll make a bargain with you, Mr. Hamilton," he said, lighting another of his everlasting cigarettes. "If you will promise to give me a hand in this little affair I'll tell you how I happen to know so much of your personal history. Is it a go?"

"What do you want me to do?" I asked lamely.

"Then you will help me?"

"I'll think about it. I don't fancy the job of thief-catching, but if there's any excitement in it I may take a shy at it."

Dodd tipped his flagon with evident satisfaction. Then he leaned over the table, and said, in a low voice, with an eye on the waiter:

"I know where that ruby hilt is this very minute. I have known its whereabouts for forty-eight hours, but——"

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

"Police?" Dodd sniffed contemptuously. "They are a pack of bunglers. The crook who copped the sparkler is as fly as they make them, and he would give them the laugh. No, I have sized up the game and there is only one way to work it. That way requires two men, and now that you have agreed to be one of them we'll go ahead. You say you don't want any money. Well, if excitement is your line you may have enough and to spare."

He winked at me with the utmost friendliness, and then continued:

"To-night a dance is to be given up near the monastery. You know the place, I am sure. It's that old stone house with the gable roof. The dance will be one of the usual type, free for all, and my man with the sparkler will be there. It will be the first time he has ventured from his hiding place since he pinched the jewel, and what I propose to do is to nab him when he least expects it."

"Will he have the ruby hilt with him?" I asked doubtfully.

"Sure. He never lets it out of his sight. Why, man, that stone is worth at least ten thousand dollars. Jim knows a good thing when he sees it."

"Jim?"

Dodd chuckled.

"Yes, Jim Bogert. That's his name. He's an old Tenderloin crook. Used to be a policeman before he took to second-story work. I thought he was all in—given up the goods and laid himself away, you know, until I saw him here the other day. I knew my man. The work was after Jim's style, and I landed on his trail right away."

"Why didn't he leave this place?"

Dodd smiled pityingly.

"It's plain to be seen you are—ahem!—rather green in this line of work," he replied. "He's laying low, waiting until the thing is forgotten. He is posing as an invalid from Manchester here for his health, and it would be giving the game away if he left before he is cured, see? I understand he intends to get away soon, though."

"He certainly will if you succeed in nabbing him," I smiled.

"Sure thing. Now, Mr. Hamilton, if you will come here about seven this evening we'll start for that dance. I am putting up here, as it is quiet and retired. Remember, you'll have a chance to see a little fun. Bring your best gun, and be sure it is loaded."

To the impulsive streak in my nature must be added another no less undesirable—an adventurous spirit which finds pleasure in acts of daring. I realized perfectly well that I had no business to mix up in Dodd's thief-catching enterprise, but I really could not help it.

There was something attractive in the man, and then he promised me a little "fun" with an added zest of danger. Frankly, I found myself in prime good spirits as I joined him at seven o'clock in the modest café.

He was attired in a rough suit of clothes, and wore a cap pulled low over his forehead. I noticed that the collar of his coat was broad, so that when he turned it up very little of his face could be seen. We sallied forth without delay, and in the course of an hour gained the vicinity of the dance place.

It was quite dark, and the scattering, badly trimmed street lights did little to guide our footsteps. Dodd seemed familiar with the way, however, and led me straight to a large house in a particularly uninviting side lane. After exchanging a few words with a man at the door we gained admittance to a large patio, or court, and found it fairly crowded with a rather nondescript company.

It did not require a second glance to tell me that we were on the scene of a native dance which was picturesque enough to form one of the attractions of the town, and to which visitors with sufficient curiosity flocked in numbers. The dances given were *outré*, and disturbances

among the native frequenters were not uncommon. It was hardly a place where one would care to take his sister or sweetheart, yet the court contained more than one woman.

Dodd remained in the shadow of the door until a girl pirouetting at the other end attracted the attention of the spectators, then he led me to a secluded spot behind a mass of boxed ferns. He scanned the company closely, and then, evidently failing to find the object of his search, he began to watch the entrance.

For the better part of an hour we remained in one position, and I was beginning to feel annoyed when suddenly the detective clutched my arm and whispered hoarsely:

"There, see that tall man in the white helmet nearest the door? That's Jim Bogert. My, isn't he the swell?"

The man he indicated was at least six feet in height and built like an athlete. His face was ruddy, his beard blond, and he sported a monocle. He was clad in the usual British tourist costume, and even carried the inevitable field-glass case hung over his shoulder. He was as little like the ordinary conception of a "second-story" man as one could imagine.

"Do you mean to tell me," I began, but Dodd warned me to silence.

"Sh-h-h!" he whispered. "That's Jim Bogert, I tell you. He's the slickest ever. Now listen to me. As soon as he has settled himself we must station ourselves directly behind him. When I say 'nab him!' you clap your revolver against his head and threaten to blow out his brains if he makes a move. I'll get the ruby hilt which, I think, he carries in his inside coat pocket, then I'll slip the darbies on him and we'll have our man. There may be a row, but I know you won't mind."

I must confess that I had entirely lost sight of the proprieties of the occasion. The glamour of the scene, and the fact that I was engaged in an enterprise that possibly would prove extremely dangerous made me forget everything else. I entered into Dodd's plans with enthusiasm.

The performance was now going briskly. A stage had been improvised at the far end of the court, and upon this platform two native conjurers began their act. In one corner several musicians struck up a dancing air. There was a restless murmur among the audience, and all eyes were turned toward the stage.

Dodd leaned over and said, in a strained voice:

"Be ready. He—Jim—see, he has taken a seat over near the door."

I caught a glimpse of the detective's face. It was ghastly in the subdued light. For the first time I realized that what we were about to undertake was no child's play. But, really, I was not prepared to see such evident trepidation in a man of Dodd's profession. Before I had time to speculate further the audience broke into applause.

A dancing girl ran from an adjoining room and began the most wonderful gyrations. She was marvelously beautiful, about sixteen years of age, and had the clear-cut features and olive complexion of the Circassian. The dance she gave was so graceful and filled with such poetry of motion that I entirely forgot the errand which had brought me to the house. It was recalled by a sudden movement on Dodd's part.

Touching me upon the arm he made an almost imperceptible signal, then began to edge his way toward the entrance. I followed at his heels. In the course of a minute we had gained a spot directly behind Bogert without either he or the rest of the audience noticing it. The detective gave me one last whispered word of instruction.

"Hold your revolver under the edge of your coat—that's the way. Now, when I say the word, grab him by the back of the neck and press the gun against his temple. Ready! Nab him!"

The final words were uttered in such a low tone that I barely heard them. With my nerves tingling I lurched forward and threw my left arm about Bogert's neck. The next second the cold rim of my "forty-four" caught him fairly on the right temple.

"If you move, or make a sound, I'll pull the trigger!"

I flatter myself the threat was given without a trace of excitement, and in such a subdued tone that only Bogert heard me. As he slowly twisted about in his seat in evident stupefaction, Dodd leaned across me, and, with a fierce tug, tore open Bogert's coat.

I heard a half-stifled curse, then something flashed in the light. I had only time enough to see that the object was the gold hilt of a broken sword with an enormous ruby in the end, and that it was clutched tightly in Dodd's hand when, with a mighty upward wrench, Bogert forced himself from my grasp.

As I stumbled backward, almost felled by a blow from a powerful fist, Dodd sprang over me and with a catlike bound reached the door. He was gone in an instant and Bogert after him.

Of the extraordinary scene that followed I have no distinct recollection. It seemed to me that I was surrounded by a howling mob of angry men, and that many blows were landed upon my defenseless body. Women screamed, lamps were overturned, and then in the ensuing half darkness I was dragged into the open air.

And then I felt sleep come to me—a merciful oblivion that absorbed my senses.

* * * * * * *

Bogert's deep voice was the first sound I heard when I awoke. It was broad daylight, and the sun, hot and glaring, came, oddly enough, through an unfamiliar barred window. As I stirred I heard the deep voice say:

"Humph! he's around at last. By Jove! the chap has had a narrow escape, and he can count himself deuced lucky the crowd didn't suspend him from the nearest tree as they sometimes hang people in his country. Well, Mr. Hamilton, how are you?"

I glanced up into the ruddy face with its blond beard and ever-present monocle. It was a kindly, honest eye that gleamed behind the round bit of glass, and I knew then and there that its owner was no second-story man, nor any other kind of scalawag.

I sat up in the bed, and in the act discovered a very unpleasant pain in my right shoulder, but I maintained the position and looked squarely into the Englishman's face.

"Tell me the truth, if you please," I said simply. "I know now that it was a game. How deep am I in it?"

"Straight and to the point. I like that," was the hearty response. "You are not in it very deep, my dear sir, except a wrenched shoulder and a few bruises."

"I don't mean that. Where is Dodd?"

"In the next cell."

"Then——"

"That chap is the most daring and skillful crook in all

England. He's been after me for the past four months trying to steal that ruby. You may think it queer that I carry it, but I am a bit superstitious, and I believe it brings me luck. I had an idea Dodd, or 'Donovan' to give his real name, was here, so when I visited the place I took the thing with me. He must have guessed that I would do so. And now, my good fellow, you need not bother to explain your connection. We know it all from Donovan. He told the story as a good joke this morning."

I winced. Instead of a joke it was a most humiliating experience for me, and I said so in as many words.

"Did he explain how he knew so much about me?" I added.

The big Englishman chuckled and readjusted his glass.

"Yes. Pardon me, my dear fellow, but it's deuced funny," he replied. "Donovan, it seems, was your Uncle Howard's valet for a month or so. He took the position for the purpose of stealing, I suppose. Well, according to Donovan, the good man thinks so much of you that he's always talking about you. That's how the rogue learned your history."

"Well, he has added a not very pleasant chapter to it," I confessed. "But it served me right for meddling."

I am rather inclined to believe that the Englishman agreed with me.

AN UNCONSIDERED CLEW.

By HORACE W. OVERTON.

When the great transatlantic liner *Anchoria*, of the Clynard line, collided with a tramp steamship—the *Mary B.*, I think it was—during a fog off the Massachusetts coast, and sank in some twenty fathoms of water, the underwriters sent for me to come on immediately; for I am not without some reputation as a deep-sea diver, and they wanted me to recover a quantity of specie which had gone down with the ill-fated vessel.

The catastrophe had occurred in the early evening, and it was in the afternoon of the following day that I arrived at the village nearest the scene of the wreck. I found the company's agent waiting for me.

"Glad we've secured you, Higgins," he said. "I've had a job to get quarters for you, though, for the town is full of survivors and relatives. You see, there were about two hundred of the passengers and crew unaccounted for—all of them drowned, I expect. However, you'll find a very decent berth at Callaghan's, which is the only joint in the place worthy the name of hotel. By the way, there's a Miss Somers stopping there who is most anxious to see you. Her father—he was a retired banker and a very rich man, I understand—went down with the vessel, and she wants to see about recovering his body. The salvage tug will be here in the morning, I expect. See you later."

With a wave of his hand he hurried off in the direction of the telegraph office, while I made my way down the main street to the hostelry where I was to lodge.

When I introduced myself to the proprietor, I was again notified of the young lady's urgent desire to see me, and, learning that she was in a small reception room off the main parlor, I pushed open the door, and entered. She was a very pretty girl of about twenty-one, and when I entered she was talking to a smooth-shaven man of robust build, who was some ten years her senior. He was evidently an Englishman, and was rather a good-looking chap, in a way, though his eyes were set too close together to suit me. Their backs were turned toward me, so they didn't see me at first, and while I hesitated to interrupt them I could not very well avoid overhearing some of their conversation.

"So you have quite made up your mind to engage the diver?" he was saying.

"I certainly have," she replied. "I cannot understand why you should seek to dissuade me, Reginald."

"I only want to spare you pain," said the man, "the pain of being shocked by the sight of your dead father's remains. I have heard that there is often a terrible distortion in the features of persons who have been drowned."

"Thank you, but I am well enough to stand that kind of shock," was the coldly spoken reply. Whatever the relations between these two were, there was no great liking for her companion on the part of the young lady, I thought.

Then, realizing that I was eavesdropping, I spoke. "Pardon me," I said, "but aren't you Miss Somers?"

"Oh, are you the diver?" she asked breathlessly. "Yes, I am Miss Somers. I heard you were expected by this train, and I wanted to offer you a commission before you were overwhelmed with others. My father, Charles Burton Somers—you may have heard of him—went down in the *Anchoria*. He was in his stateroom—number forty-eight, on the upper deck—when the collision came, and his body is doubtless there. I will give you five hundred dollars if you will bring it up for me."

She poured out this as if expecting to be stopped by her companion, who, however, made no comment. I was conscious that he was sizing me up pretty closely.

"I am engaged by the underwriters to salve the species in the bullion room, miss, but I guess they won't object to my accepting a private commission," I told her. "I will do my best, but I may not be able to enter the cabin. That isn't always so easy in a deep-water wreck, as the jar of foundering may have jammed the cabin door."

Here Miss Somers' companion addressed me for the first time.

"The ship lies in deep water, then?" he inquired quickly.

"In twenty fathoms," I answered. "So, at least, I was advised in the telegram from the underwriters."

"That will make it difficult for you to explore the vessel," he remarked, with seeming carelessness.

"Well, it won't lighten my task," I replied. "But the salvage tug is sure to be furnished with the best appliances, and I have no doubt that I shall raise the bullion all right in the end."

"That, of course, will be the first consideration," was his comment. "It looks very much as if you would be delayed by weather."

There was some truth in what he said, for any one with half an eye could see that there was a very good imitation of a storm brewing. But I told him curtly: "It takes a lot of weather to stop me," and then left them, to see about getting a meal.

Many of the *Anchoria's* passengers and crew who had survived had already departed by this time, but there were quite a few still there, those remaining being mostly people who had lost relatives or friends, and were loath to leave the spot.

In the dining room I seated myself opposite a pleasant looking young man whose uniform denoted that he had been an officer on the ill-fated vessel. He introduced

himself as Ralph Mayhew, second officer of the *Anchoria*. The captain and first officer having been drowned, he had been instructed by the steamship company to stay and watch over their interests.

We naturally discussed the recent tragedy, and I told him of my commission to find the body of Mr. Somers. He seemed to know the parties concerned, so I asked him who Miss Somers' companion was.

"He must have been Mr. Reginald Sprangwyn, the man she is to marry," was the reply.

Before we parted that evening, the young fellow had confided to me, with sailorlike frankness, that all the way across the Atlantic he had worshiped that portion of the deck trod for the moment by Ethel Somers' dainty shoes.

"And I believed she liked me a little," he added, with the expansive trust of youth. "I know she hates that fellow Sprangwyn, and was only engaged to him to please her father. During the voyage she got away from him whenever she could. When it wasn't my watch, she spent her time in my company. Between you and me, I think Mr. Somers was an infatuated old fool, deceived by that fellow's specious manners into thinking him a good sort. He's a cousin, or something, of an English lord, I believe. My captain had crossed with him several times, and looked on Sprangwyn as a well-born rascal. He is in the mine-prospecting line, and I'm told has been mixed up in several shady enterprises."

"But surely, now that Mr. Somers is dead, Miss Somers will throw him over, won't she?" I suggested.

"Not much!" responded Mayhew dolefully. "I tackled her about it this morning. She was very nice to me, but she said that more than ever now she feels bound to abide by her father's wishes. It seems that when the ship struck, Sprangwyn rushed off to the old gentleman's stateroom and tried to rouse him, so as to get him into a boat, but failed to make him hear. To give the devil his due, I can corroborate his assertion, for I saw him hammering on the door of number forty-eight just before the vessel foundered. He cannot have left much margin for saving himself."

I saw no more of the second officer that evening, but I was destined to have another meeting with Mr. Reginald Sprangwyn. I had retired to my room, and had begun to undress, preparatory to turning in, when there came a tap at the door, and Miss Somers' fiancé looked in.

"Can I have a word with you, Mr. Higgins?" he said, very civilly. "It is upon a rather serious matter," he went on, entering at my bidding. "You observed that I was not very keen on Miss Somers making that offer to you? Well, I had good reason. I am going to marry her, and I did not wish her feelings to be harrowed by the discovery which you will probably make—that her father was murdered."

"Murdered!" I could only repeat.

"Yes, foully slain by Mayhew, the second officer. At any rate, when I ran to the stateroom to rouse Mr. Somers, I saw Mayhew in the act of closing the door, and he held a pistol in his hand."

This statement for a moment threw me into a state of cold perspiration. But the tension passed with the recollection of the young sailor's frank and open face. After all, ships' officers generally arm themselves on such an occasion to stall off ugly rushes for the boats, and the revolver was probably thus to be accounted for, if it had really been there. I said as much to my visitor, who seemed to weigh his words before he spoke again.

"But Mayhew had reason to dislike Mr. Somers," he said. "The young idiot had made sheep's eyes at Miss Somers during the voyage, and had been most effectually cold-shouldered by her father."

"Then, holding these suspicions, why did you not denounce him, instead of trying to prevent an examination of the body?" I asked.

"Because, I repeat, I wanted to spare Miss Somers pain; it was only after reflection that I saw how wrong I was in defeating the ends of justice."

"And if I find Mr. Somers with a bullet in him, you will be prepared to accuse Mayhew?"

"Certainly," said Sprangwyn.

I bade him good night, and dismissed the matter from my mind so far as I could. Lovers' jealousies were not much in my line, and the chances were that if I succeeded in entering the stateroom I should find Mr. Somers honestly drowned, with no traces of the suggested crime upon him. Yet against this optimism there was to be debited Mayhew's disappointment as a motive, and his own confirmation of Sprangwyn's statement that he had been near to the dead man's cabin just prior to the foundering of the ship.

On the other hand, the behavior of Sprangwyn, while holding this suspicion, in endeavoring to prevent an exploration of the cabin, seemed as unaccountable as his swift change to denunciation of Mayhew.

The next morning broke damp and misty, with drizzling rain; but the wind had subsided, and there was nothing to hinder diving operations. The tug had arrived, and, after an early breakfast, I went aboard with the insurance agent and young Mayhew. Of course, I said nothing to the latter about the suspicion directed at him.

It was a dreary scene when we reached the place where the wreck lay. The crew of the tug flitted about the slippery deck like ghosts in the foggy atmosphere, while I, after donning my fantastic diver's dress, must have looked like some strange being from another world.

The life lines and air tubes having been adjusted, and the electric lamp fixed to my breast, I went over the tug's side. There was a long, oily swell on the water, but the surface was calm, and I quickly descried the great steamer lying below me. Steering my way carefully past the steel masts and rigging, I narrowly shaved the promenade deck, and so first felt my feet on the upper deck, close to a range of deck cabins.

One of these must have been occupied by Mr. Somers; and I decided, since I had alighted there, to test Sprangwyn's story before going into the bullion room. I found number forty-eight without any difficulty, but I had no sooner tried the door than I was struck with a discrepancy in Mayhew's narrative. There was no need for Sprangwyn to have "hammered" on the door. It was not locked.

On entering, my heart misgave me. I had taken a liking to the boyish second officer, and what I saw augured ill for him. Persons drowned like rats in a trap, while sleeping in their berths, are not found—so runs my grim experience—seated in a chair before a bracket table, with writing materials before them.

Yet so it was with the half-dressed, white-haired occupant of No. 48. This was no case of a man drowned in his sleep, I saw, at a glance. The trousers and shirt

on him testified to his having heard the alarm; but why had he not left his cabin, scantily clad as he was, and joined the rush for the boats? I went a little nearer, and saw the reason in a red hole in the cambric shirt, from which the salt water that sagged and oozed in that confined space had not yet cleansed the telltale stain. He had been shot through the lungs.

A glance over his shoulder showed that his arm had fallen forward, and so prevented the paper on which he had been writing from being washed away. I read it, and I venture to say that the glass eyes of a diver's headpiece have never before or since looked upon such a strange message from the dead. I reflected for a moment, then gave the signal that I wanted to come to the surface.

"Don't tell me it's a hopeless job!" cried the agent, with his mind on the precious freight, as I was helped into the tug.

Avoiding Mayhew's questioning gaze, I took the agent aside and showed him the paper that I had brought from the depths of the sea.

"Quite right! No time to be lost!" he exclaimed, after listening to my explanation; and the tug was promptly headed for the beach. It was crowded with survivors and others who had been watching our operations, among the spectators being Mr. Sprangwyn, and—most important of all just then—the village policeman.

To this official I addressed myself, and his face grew grave.

"Any one name of Sprangwyn here?" he inquired, turning to the gathering crowd.

Miss Somers' fiancé sauntered forward.

"You wish me to corroborate the diver's testimony—that Mr. Charles Somers was murdered?" he said, glancing triumphantly at Mayhew.

"You confess, then?" the policeman asked. "If you do, it will be used against you, you know. I'm going to take you into custody for the murder."

"On whose charge?" faltered Sprangwyn, turning pale.

"On that of Mr. Charles Somers himself," was the reply.

* * * * * * *

For thus ran the wave-washed document which finished the career of the heartless scoundrel who had hoped, by slaying her father, to make his engagement to the heiress instantly profitable:

"I hope I shall have strength to finish this, and that it will come to light. Reginald Sprangwyn shot me. I suppose the ship is sinking. I was hurrying on some clothes when he appeared at the cabin door and fired at me. I cannot cry for help, my mouth being full of blood, but I have staggered into this chair to accuse my murderer. Don't let Ethel marry a man who, I see too late, was only eager to enrich——"

"Himself" was doubtless the word which Mr. Somers would have added had there been time.

Sprangwyn had forgotten the diver's craft when he committed the crime.

When I talk the business over with my friend Mayhew, now happily married to the girl of his heart, the point I always emphasize is this—the ghastly idea of the murderer knocking at the unlocked door, in order to explain his presence there, when behind it sat the victim, whom he believed to be dead, writing his death warrant.

The Man With the Thumb.

By GEORGE PARSONS BRADFORD.

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

Dick Tarrion, a young man out of employment, while looking over the want columns of a newspaper, is accosted by a man whom he knows only as a frequenter of the cheap restaurant where Dick has been in the habit of taking his breakfasts, and whom Dick has named "Gray Eyes." The man calls Dick's attention to an advertisement for a close-mouthed gentleman, willing to travel, cool, and having had no experience in the insurance business. Dick applies for the position by letter, and is directed to call up "Twenty-o-ten, Chelsea" on the telephone. As he does so he overhears a conversation on the wire. One speaker says that he will make Richard Tarrion wish he had never been born. Dick is engaged over the telephone, in a mysterious manner, and is directed to report to Mr. Horton, president of the Mortimer Trust Company, who tells him that at the expiration of five weeks he will receive a check for one thousand dollars for his services. He is supplied with a railway ticket to Cincinnati and two hundred dollars in currency, but the nature of the work he is to perform remains a mystery. He is told, however, that when his train reaches Altoona, at night, further instructions will be given in a letter which will be placed in his sleeping berth by a man named Michaels. He is also requested to change his name from Tarrion to Trent. When the train reaches Altoona, he sees that Michaels is none other than "Gray Eyes." The letter given to him reveals the fact that Michaels was a collegemate of Dick's. It also directs Dick to go to a little village named Roan's, at the foot of Roan Mountain, in Kentucky, and there get the thumb print of a man whose photograph is inclosed in the letter. Dick discovers on the train a man who was shadowing him before he left New York.

CHAPTER V.

THE AFFABLE DRUMMER.

At three o'clock the following morning the train hands aroused me from the deepest of slumbers, and set me down at Livingston.

This was the heart of Kentucky. Thus far had I come in comparative comfort, by a broad-gauge, well-ballasted road, in fairly easy cars with plush cushions on the seats.

There were no sleeping cars on this branch of the road, to be sure, but the plush cushions were not so bad when you turned over the seat next in front of you and used them both in lieu of a berth.

Besides, I was tired—worn out with excitement; and I think I could have slept almost anywhere. During the early part of the evening an extremely affable drummer had bored me to desperation with his determined attempts to be friendly, and I had at length only succeeded in evading him by dozing off in the middle of one of his long-winded stories.

He took that hint, leaving me in peace for the rest of the night. And now—I was in Livingston.

From here a narrow-gauge railway—a native feelingly said that "The rails were just laid on the ground, and then tacked down"—a branch of the trunk line, wound a devious and leisurely way southeast to the Cumberland Mountains, which stopped its farther progress across the State line into West Virginia.

My train was making up as I stood there, shivering in the cold that comes before dawn. My affable friend, the drummer, also had aroused and kept me company, his teeth chattering like castanets.

From the nearing mountains the night wind swept down chill upon us; although we knew that with the coming of the sun the heat would grow intense.

By the light of kerosene lanterns a few clumsy train hands ran together and coupled one passenger coach, one

mail coach, and a baggage car, the whole being finally attached to a wheezy locomotive and decrepit tender. A man driving a horse and wagon came up from somewhere in the darkness, and deposited two or three lean leathern mail pouches on the platform, whereupon a sleepy postal clerk took them, without a word, and marched off to the car.

The engineer climbed into his cab, and tootled the mournful, asthmatic whistle.

Judging that this must be the signal for the start, we —the drummer and I—clambered aboard. But for some minutes we lingered while the engineer and fireman engaged in an altercation, helped by the conductor, who stood by, apparently for the sole purpose of injecting a word now and then, when it would do the most evil.

Finally, however, the fireman gave in, and slouched off into the darkness, to reappear before very long with a hip flask, which he passed up to the engineer, and a second, which he handed over to the conductor.

Then we made the start, to the accompaniment of an inordinate amount of puffing and wheezing on the part of the engine. From my window, however, I could see the night sliding softly past us, and sank back content.

But not comfortable; far from it. The seats were of plain, unvarnished wood, and very, very hard. I fought the good fight for an hour or so, but in the end had to give in, take off my coat, and use that for a cushion.

The train loafed along dismally, stopping, I figured, every time the engineer espied a light. For a while the stoppages were about every ten minutes, but this period of time gradually lengthened to fifteen and twenty, and once we ran a whole half hour without pausing—except that speed was of necessity slackened on the up grades.

The would-be ingratiating drummer and I were the only passengers. The conductor took our tickets with a lordly air, and passed on into the mail coach, from where voices issued, charged with much liquor.

At each stop the conductor would return and eye us irritably, as though resenting the fact that we were there, requiring to be looked after.

As for the drummer, in his misery he produced his flask, offered it me, and, upon my declining, solaced himself freely. Ere long he snored stridently, and I envied him the rest.

Myself, the time before the coming of the dawn seemed interminable. But, lulled by the rhythm of the commercial traveler's snoring, I soon slept again, fitfully and incautiously. Once or twice I awoke, and looked about, to find everything as I had last left it—the smoky, dingy, yellow-lighted car jolting and hurling itself forward over shaky tracks; and without, the night, unbrokenly black and blank.

Then I slept again, waking, to find the affable drummer standing over me, his fingers in my pockets.

I gasped, looking into the muzzle of a revolver.

"So it was you?" I said, remembering the enemy I had feared before, who had fallen upon me in my berth, and slipped his hand beneath my pillow.

I could see now that the shoulders of him were broad —the sole characteristic I had noted in the other man, and judged then both to be the same—as indeed his next words proved was the fact.

"Yes, it's me," he growled—snarled, rather; "and I'm a-goin' to git even with ye for hammerin' me 'round that a way. Hand over them papers!"

With this, he let me smell the nose of the gun, and I shivered, but temporized.

"What papers?" I said.

"Ye know well enough. Them thet feller gave ye at Altoona. Hand 'em over—I want 'em."

He seemed to be in earnest. Formerly, when he had sought to engage me in conversation, he had spoken differently; his words had been unmarred by dialect.

Now he dropped all pretense of using decent English, and swore at me in the homely brogue of the Kentucky mountaineer.

He was not very large, nor well built; rather disproportionate, you would say; barring those heavy shoulders, he did not seem to fit, part for part. In the old days, when I had studied sketching for a while, I would have said that he was out of drawing.

"I thought, estimating his strength by the visible build of him, that I was probably his master—were it not for that deadly revolver.

And the conductor was two cars ahead, quite out of the range of my voice above the roar and rattle of the train.

It was still night, and a cloudy one, the train hammering on wildly through dense darkness.

"Come! young feller, come! I'm in airnest."

I believed him. I was quite at his mercy. I feared his anger, should he discover that my message from Michaels had been destroyed. He did not impress me as a man with overmuch control of his temper.

And disappointment is apt to arouse a man's anger—more apt than otherwise.

"I have no papers," I told him, squarely looking him in the eye.

"You hain't!" he cried. "You hain't? D'ye want me to convince ye that ye hez?"

"I do not," I responded promptly, with my eyes on that gun. He held it too steadily, too purposefully, for my comfort.

"I'll have to convince you, so far as that goes," I continued rapidly. "I have nothing that you want. You can search me if you wish."

"Git off'n thet coat, then," he commanded, emphasizing his order with the gun.

And I got expeditiously.

He took it up, and requested me, with no courtesy at all, to resume my seat. I did so, unprotesting.

I knew that he could find nothing about me to implicate me. Everything I had received from "Chelsea" or Michaels I had been careful to destroy, as well as—

But then the thought came to me that I had committed a fatal blunder. In my pockets there yet remained letters addressed to "Richard Tarrion." Whereas I traveled as "Trent," and my letter to Quake introduced "Trent."

This man would come across them, compare the conflicting names, and then—— Or, if he had been advised to look for Tarrion, as I feared, if my real name had been used in communicating with him—well, the jig was up, and I would deserve no thousand dollars wherewith to pay the piper.

My fears were realized to the uttermost.

Keeping a wary eye upon me, and his revolver stuck in his belt, ready for instant use, this man ran his hands through my coat pockets, and brought out all this incriminating evidence.

He did not trouble to open and read my personal letters—merely ran his eye over the superscription.

"Ha, Tarrion!" he observed, grinning evilly.

I stood, powerless, and feeling like a whipped cur should, while he removed the inclosure from the letter to Quake, and read it.

"Trent!" he observed again, casting that eye sarcastically at me. "You're clumsy enough, Tarrion-Trent."

"Oh, as for that— –"

I didn't trouble to finish the sentence. What was the use of bandying words? I had cooked my goose by this piece of shortsightedness, and there was an end to it.

"But," he broke out, unsuccessful in his search for that which he desired most earnestly, "whar's thet letter from Michaels?"

I was smitten with an inspiration.

"In my satchel," I said quickly, and reached for it. My own revolver was in there, since I had not thought to have so early a use for it.

"No, ye don't," he answered, pushing me back with that muzzle. "I'll see to thet."

He took up from the floor both the satchel and the camera case—my sole impedimenta—and put them on the seat. In order to open them he was obliged to ask me for my keys, which I handed over with the most dispirited air I could assume.

I wanted him to believe me utterly crushed; for all hope of retrieving this error had not yet left me.

He wrestled with the keys, fitting first one and another before he got the valise open, and plunged his hand into it.

Doing so, he turned sideways, and for the first time his eye left me; he was deceived by my disconsolate mien, or overconfident, perhaps.

And the butt of that revolver tempted me from its place in his belt.

I jumped for it, gripping it with my fingers while striking heavily at his temple with my bare knuckles.

The blow glanced, and he roared with rage, grappling fiercely.

But Providence and the revolver were now on my side. I was unafraid.

He was a strong man, if an evil one; I'll say that for him. My hands were full to overflowing. We had it, rough-house, back and forth, up and down the aisle of that car, from door to door.

Once he tripped me, and well-nigh broke my back over a seat, and once he got his thumb under my eyeballs, starting a slow, galling, fearful pressure; but then I found his other thumb, and clinched my teeth upon it—I shiver to think of it now—and he yelped and let go.

In the end of that struggle, we two reeled, still fighting desperately—for I would not give in, and he was bred to fight on to the last gasp, we reeled, I say, out upon the rear platform of the train.

It was then passing over a trestle, as I knew by the vibration and roaring of the passing timbers, and——

And abruptly I found my hands empty; mine enemy gone. In nightmares, sometimes, I recall the terrified glint in his eyes as he fell, screaming.

There was no guard rail out there—nothing but a slender chain swinging between two posts; and so, fearful myself of a like fate, in some lurch of the train, I forced myself back into the car.

With his scream—was it his death cry? I wondered fearfully—still ringing in my ears, I gathered together his traps and tossed them from the window. Then I sat me down, simulating a composure that was not mine, and seemed to sleep.

Some ten minutes later we drew into a wayside village, and presently our conductor glanced in upon us, after the train had started again.

His eye roamed the car in wonderment.

"Stranger," he said to me, "whar's t'other o' you-uns?"

I started from my guilty, pretended nap.

"He?" I said. "The drummer? Oh, he got off at the last station."

"Did he, now?" He pondered, scratching his head. "Thet's mighty quare, stranger. His ticket was fer Milan."

I shrugged my shoulders, with a fine indifference, and he went off to the mail car again, shaking his head continually.

I have found it a characteristic of the mountaineer, that he minds his own business rather steadily. It was so in this case, at least.

CHAPTER VI.

THE ROAD TO ROAN'S.

My conscience is a peculiar thing. It will rear up on its hind legs and prance around scandalously about the most trifling things, and let me severely alone about the most serious matters.

Take my case, that sunny morning in mid-April, for instance:

I had engaged in a terrific struggle with an unknown man, had thrown him off a moving train on a trestle.

What his fate had been, I did not know—whether he had fallen upon the trestle itself, or through and down to Heaven knew what dark depths.

And, truth to tell, I did not care overmuch. He had sought to rob me, and I had resisted to the best of my ability. He had been armed, while I was not. His fall had been an accident, so far as I was concerned. And—and "the opposition," as I had come to call my enemies, lacking a better name, were annoyingly persistent, to say the least, in thus following me up. I considered that he had received just what was coming to him.

So it was with a care-free mind that I alighted from the train at Milan, and, dropping my traps on the platform, looked about me as the train vanished around a bend, in a smother of dust and with a final screech of the whistle.

I had hoped to find the town of some consequence; a place that at least boasted a country hotel. I was disappointed utterly.

Confronting me, on one side of the railway station—a mere shed over a loose-board platform—was a building bearing the sign above its door, "General Store," with a lean-to at the side under which one was permitted to tie his horse. Both were unpainted.

A little farther down the road were three or four mean cabins, bearing a general air of listlessness and apathy. They were inclosed, with one exception, by rickety board fences; and in one of these yards I saw some rough clothing flapping upon a sagging line.

Behind me, across the tracks, the scene was repeated, with the exception of the "store."

And this was Milan! I gave up all hope, on the instant, of a day's rest at a neat tavern, and a wash, and good food; all of which I had most earnestly needed and desired.

In the middle of the street—there was but one, the road—dogs sunned themselves somnolently, undisturbed by the rooting excursions of "razorback" hogs. Here and there a chicken or two wandered lonesomely, and tethered beneath the store shed was a fine horse.

Through an unglazed window of one cabin I caught glimpses of a woman, moving about her housework; and bareheaded, half-clothed, happy children played in the dust, or sucked meditative thumbs, as they gazed wide-eyed upon me, a stranger in Milan!

Of human beings they were all in sight, barring a young giant, who sat, chair tipped back against the wall, by the side of the store door. He was whittling serenely when I arrived, and whistling. A hound dozed at his feet.

The whistling ceased, but not the whittling, and both master and dog opened one eye with one accord and observed me. Then the whistle recommenced, shrill, clear, and musical, and the young giant reverted his attention to the stick in his hands.

I stepped down from off the platform, and advanced uncertainly toward this man; the thought had struck me that Milan seemed not the most likely place in the world where one could purchase a horse.

He favored me with a second upward glance. I noted his eye, clear, bright, and fearlessly blue, with humor sparkling in its depths.

"I beg pardon," I began.

"Howdy, stranger," said he, shifting easily in his chair, the better to see my face without uptwisting his neck.

"Do you know," I continued diffidently, "if I can get a horse here?"

"What for?"

"To carry me to Roan's."

He stared a moment, grinned like a man who enjoys a secret joke, and called out loudly:

"Jake!"

A chair grounded within the store, and steps approached the door. Presently the postmaster and storekeeper of Milan slouched against the jamb, and looked me over critically, but kindly.

The young giant was again whittling. I stated my case. I wanted to go to Roan's, and needed to buy or hire a horse.

Jake cast a deliberate eye about the heavens, remarking that it didn't look like rain. I assented. He transferred his "chaw" from one side of his mouth to the other, and emphatically announced that it hed been right smart of a drought; if it kept on this way, thar wouldn't be no raftin' on the Middle Fork—of the Kentucky River—this hyeh spring.

I was agreeable to all he said; and presently Jake came down to earth, and asked me for a fresh chew of tobacco. I had none.

Maybe I wanted to buy a hunk? Jake had some prime stuff in the store. I assented, and bought a quantity.

With that we got to business. Jake reckoned he had a hoss which would do me. I inspected and bought the animal; from the wicked gleam in its eye, I felt sure that Jake reckoned well—it would "do" me.

I have reason to believe that I was cheated outrageously; but I was a stranger in a strange land, and taken in according to Scripture. The deal was closed with my breakfast, of steaming hominy, bacon, and delicious coffee—which didn't cost me a cent.

Jake looked positively hurt when I offered him money.

"If ye come back this hereaway," he told me at parting, "drap in and stay a spell. 'Twon't cost ye nothin'."

With this hospitable invitation he went back into the store. The young mountain giant, still whittling and whistling, eyed me genially.

"I was wondering," I said aloud abstractedly, for already the dreamy reposefulness in Milan's atmosphere had a hold upon me, "what might be the road to Roan's."

He shut up his jackknife deliberately, yawned, and stretched himself.

"That," he said, pointing across the tracks, in a general westerly direction, "might be the road to Roan's; but ef I was goin' thar, I'd go t'other way."

Feeling rebuked, somehow, I thanked him, mounted, and rode away. When I looked back he was again whittling.

Before me the road stretched straight, broad, and dusty for a mile or so ere losing itself in a tangle of brush. To the north and south great spurs of the Cumberlands hemmed in the valley; their green, cool, wooded sides descending at first sharply from the peaks, then more softly, in rolling, grassed undulations.

Far to the east the valley lay broad before me, shimmering in a haze of early summer heat.

I rode on; now at a rack, now more gently, according entirely to the mood of the animal I bestrode; which, evidently, suffered man to ride upon his back, but insisted on choosing his own pace.

My road to Roan's wound hither and thither, delightfully; now skirting the base of a hill—we dwellers by the sea would term it a mountain—now by the banks of a brawling stream, which I guessed was Sinful Creek, and again striking in among the meadows and cornfields of the valley.

About the middle of the afternoon a rider came up behind me swiftly, his horse's hoofs padding dully in the deep dust of the sun-baked road.

When alongside, he reined in, hailing me courteously.

He was my young giant of the tipped chair and the active Barlow knife.

"Howdy, stranger?" he said.

And I gave him back his "Howdy!"

He watched me closely, as a cat estimates a tempting bird. His eyes possessed a peculiarly piercing power, which I found not unpleasant; for, unlike the cat's, his were bottomed with no malice.

"Goin' fer?" he inquired.

"Roan's," I said briefly, adding: "My name is Trent—Dick Trent. I count on staying with Mr. Quake for a while."

"Oh, Sim!" he ejaculated, making me wonder until I recalled Quake's Christian name.

The next query came more shyly:

"Stranger, what might yo' business be?"

"It might be life insurance," I said, sparring, as I remembered his quick taking up of my slip back at the store.

His face fell seriously, and he gathered his reins up.

"Is hit?" he said suddenly.

"No," I replied cheerfully. "I'm a bird hunter—an ornithologist."

The blue eyes cleared, laughing.

"Glad ye hain't no insurance man," he resumed. "They hain't so powerful popular 'round here. No; ner lightnin'-rod agents, nuther."

He clucked to his horse.

"G'lang, Sally. Good day, Mr. Trent. See ye up to Roan's."

I watched him as he rode on at a swinging lope. He was a young giant, and no mistake; sitting in the saddle he seemed at least six feet six inches in height, and his legs were proportionately long. And he was built out, all around, on the same generous plan.

His easy, careless, graceful seat in the saddle I envied him, and the supple play of his muscles beneath the rough flannel shirt and corduroys. He wore rough cowhide boots, and had a belt strapped about his waist, in which a pistol was prominent among rows of cartridges.

One thing that caught my eyes was a big black bow of ribbon tied upon this butt. I wondered why.

He disappeared swiftly around a curve in the road; when I came to it he was gone from the landscape.

Somewhat nearer toward evening—the purple shadows were beginning to lengthen from the mountains across the valley—I came upon him again, at a crossroads.

This time he was halted by the side of the road, sitting sideways in his saddle, the reins dangling freely from one hand, while the horse cropped the grass at his feet.

At his side was a second horse, upon whose back sat a woman. She was clothed in crimson homespun, rudely hewn from the native cloth as it came from the loom, yet with a certain fit that showed a figure which could belong to none but a young girl.

Her face was hidden beneath a spreading sunbonnet; as I approached them, she drooped her head, the better to hide it, I fancied.

Across the pommel of her saddle were slung two leathern mail-pouches, with your Uncle Samuel's initials prominent thereon.

The young giant was talking in a low tone, very earnestly. I caught no word of what passed between them, nor wished to. But I saw that a hand rested over hers, and that she shook her head once, in gentle negative.

Neither noticed me, and I rode on.

I began to wonder when I should reach this Roan's. So far I had passed but few evidences of human beings—three or four shabby cabins, in the whole afternoon's ride, with slatternly women within, who came to the fence, leaning over to watch me pass.

Some of them smoked corncobs with evident comfort.

The men folks were not about, it appeared. Only the women, and the porcine and inevitable canine lords of the roadway.

But of Roan's I saw no signs. The road now wound along wooded rises, and the contour of the valley had changed.

Before me a mountain, higher than the others, reared a sunlit crest into a darkling sky; and this I hoped was Roan Mountain.

And now my giant came on again, overtaking me, and riding past without greeting, urging his horse to great speed, I caught a glimpse of his face as he whirled past, and wondered what devils were torturing him to set that angry line between his brows, that ugly, determined look about his mouth, that wild light in his eyes.

This was in dim twilight. He vanished quickly between the banks of laurel and rhododendron that screened the road before me, and I heard his horse's hoofs splashing in water. Wherefrom I judged a ford was ahead.

And then a rifle shot cracked suddenly, and I heard the shrill, pitiful scream of a stricken horse. Thereupon more shots rang out, and I dashed forward, regardless of consequenc

CHAPTER VII.

LANG M'COMB.

Once at the farther side of that screen of bush, I reined my horse in upon his haunches.

We stood upon the top of a rise, looking down into a little vale, through which wandered the creek. About us, the forest was somewhat thick, the light dimmer, and shadows more dense in consequence.

Across this stream a bridge spanned—a rude thing of rough-hewn logs, but little used, I fancied, from the fact that the waters were so low that a well-defined ford, paved with bright pebbles, glimmered through them.

The road, too, was more well worn where it led down to the ford.

Upon the bridge, however, now two men sat on horseback, while a little back, on the other side of the stream, a third stood.

All three were armed with Winchesters, and all three were using their rifles steadily. Little flashes of scarlet-bellied flame sprang rapidly from the smoking muzzles, and the wood resounded with the rattle of gun play and the swish of flying bullets that ricochetted from the surface of the water, or from protruding rocks, and spent their flights in the forest's depths.

Now and again a bullet would strike near at hand with a dull crash as it bored into a tree trunk, and, now looking down, I saw that at which these three were firing.

In the creek, fallen across the ford, lay a horse; his head had fallen to the bottom, and his nostrils were under water; I knew from that that he was dead.

Near the animal a huge sycamore had been uprooted by some mountain storm, and now lay with its tangle of gnarled roots resting on the river bed.

Behind them a dark figure crouched, revolver gleaming in hand, and as occasion presented, fired at one or another of his three antagonists. But with little or no effect.

The failing light made aiming difficult, I know; but, for all that, I think that this man behind the sycamore root had little time more to live, with three assassins concentrating a fire upon him at such short range, when I came upon the scene.

The manifest unfairness displayed made my blood tingle with shame ere it simmered with rage; and, knowing nothing of what merit for either side the quarrel had which had brought this attack about, my sympathies were instantly on the lone fighter's side.

From my coign of vantage, on a height superior to them all, I saw all this as I brought out my weapon. And now I saw the third man, on the opposite shore, dodging from tree to tree down the bank, to gain a better aim at his prey.

None of them, absorbed as they were with their foul play, had even seen or heard me approaching. I gathered this from the yell of surprise that arose when I fired at the third man.

I winged him—a purely chance shot, for which I want no credit—and saw him fall, then arise painfully, and limp back toward the road.

Upon the instant that cry of astonishment arose, and then one of the holders of the bridge—the man nearest me—swung his Winchester to bear upon me.

I fired again, hitting nothing, coincident with his shot, which fanned my face with its quick, cool, terrible breath.

My heart was in my mouth, for my revolver had no chance, for accuracy of carriage, with the rifle; and I saw myself wounded, at least, when the man behind the sycamore came to my aid. His shot—a chance one, too—struck my opponent in the arm, and he dropped his weapon, cursing.

Upon the one remaining man I now fired, and he, calling to the others, turned swiftly and fled, with his companions pounding at his heels; for now the farthest man, whom I had shot, had brought his horse forth from the brush and mounted.

Their flying hoofbeats rang a mad tune down the road, then suddenly swerved, and died softly in the distance.

"They've took the crossroads to Badalia," I heard a voice comment pleasantly at my elbow.

Automatically ejecting the empty cartridges from my revolver, and reloading, I looked down into the smiling eyes of the young giant.

He was dripping wet from his ducking, but seemed otherwise unhurt.

"Badalia?" I repeated dazedly. For events had come so swiftly and unexpectedly in the past ten minutes that I was not yet master of myself.

"Yes. Them Wades mostly all comes from 'round Badalia way. Thet's over yon."

He swept a hand toward the southerly spur, on the far side of the valley, and held out his hand.

"Thank ye, Mr. Trent," he said. "Ye sho'ly saved my life. I won't fergit hit, nuther."

"Oh, that's all right," I replied, painfully conscious of the inadequacy of the words. "Don't say any more——"

"Oh, I ain't gwine to," he interrupted cheerfully. "Only I won't fergit. My name's Lang McComb, and I live in Roan's. Ye'll see more of me."

"Why did they run away?" I asked, constrained by the sense of his gratitude, endeavoring to turn the conversation.

He chuckled deeply.

"Reckon they hed enough," he said mirthfully. "Ye kinder skeered 'em."

Taking my bridle rein, he now led the horse down the slope, and over the bridge, possessing himself of the fallen and abandoned Winchester as we passed it.

"Hit's a shore good gun," he commented, patting it with appreciation. "Youell, I reckon, will miss hit."

"Why did they attack you?"

"Wanted to kill me."

"Why?" I pressed the question. He had drawn into his shell, suddenly cautious.

"Trouble atween us, stranger. Youells can hit a feud. Hit's a family trouble mostly."

"May I ask, do you people generally fight from ambush? They ambushed you, didn't they?"

"I reckon they did. They'd been layin' for me for a long spell. No, sir; the McCombs don't do no fightin' from ambush. Them Wade whelps"—he used a more bitter word—"does all the dirty work in this hyeh trouble."

I sat silent upon my horse as we plodded on through the night, revolving what I had heard in my mind. The Kentucky feud I had hitherto believed a thing of the past; it was terribly real to me now.

"That's why they-all is winnin'," he drawled, after a short silence. "They ain't so many McCombs as they uster be, but the Wades is thrivin'. Shootin' from ambush agrees with that breed o' cattle—— But hit won't long!" he added, with savage emphasis.

I waited before interjecting my next question.

"Would you mind telling me," I said, "when this trouble started, and why?"

In the darkness I felt his eyes upon me, reading the purpose with which I made this inquiry. Then, with a short laugh:

"Since my gran'pappy's time," he said. "I don't know exactly what started hit, but I reckon my gran'pappy shot his gran'pappy's hound pup. And then he shot at my gran'pappy, and the trouble begun."

And of such trivial differences, I found, was the beginning of the most bloody feuds which have disgraced the name of the Kentucky mountaineer. He is a passionate creature, brooking no insults or slights; and in the Cumberlands the value of a man's life is a slight, a very slight, thing.

For some time we had been passing through fields more cultivated than those behind us. And now, prefacing his remark with the information that we had reached Roan's, Lang McComb stopped the horse, and said, with a mixture of shyness and earnestness:

"Mr. Trent, ye have been powerful good to me this day, suh; kin ye do one more favor to me, suh?"

"Certainly, if I can. What is it?"

"Don't say nothin' at Roan's—or to any one, for thet matter—about seein' me down the road there with 'Beth?"

"With who?"

"'Beth Roan, suh—Elizabeth, her name rightly is."

"Certainly not," I agreed. "But——"

He anticipated this question.

"Ye won't say nothin'," he concluded, "but I'll tell ye; I'm right smart sweet on 'Beth, en——"

Here he stopped.

"Yon's Roan's," he said. "Ride in, en don't say nothin' to nobody about meetin' me in that scrap. Chances are that Ed Wade nor Youell didn't neither on 'em see ye to know ye again, en ye'll be all right ef they didn't. Ye can't miss Quake's. That's a sign on the door. Good night, en—en thank ye again, suh. Ye can tell Quake, if ye feels like hit; he won't tell."

With this he faded into the night, and I found myself at the end of my strange journey.

Of my reception by the storekeeper I shall have somewhat to say further on in my narrative. But that night, after I had eaten and washed, as we talked, smoking, before a hickory fire in his "settin' room," I told him of the afternoon's adventure.

He arose, walking up and down the room, shaking his head argumentatively.

"I'll tell ye now," he said at length, "ye has certainly made a right bad start on yo' bird huntin'. Ef Ed Wade finds ye out, he'll sho'ly make hit hot fer ye."

Upon consideration, I felt inclined to agree with him—that I had made a bad start in my "bird huntin'."

TO BE CONTINUED.

A MISUNDERSTANDING.

Tom had been kept in at school for talking out loud.

"Why did you do it, Tom?" asked his mamma. "Didn't you know it was against the rules?"

"No," said Tom. "Teacher only said I mustn't whisper, and I didn't."

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